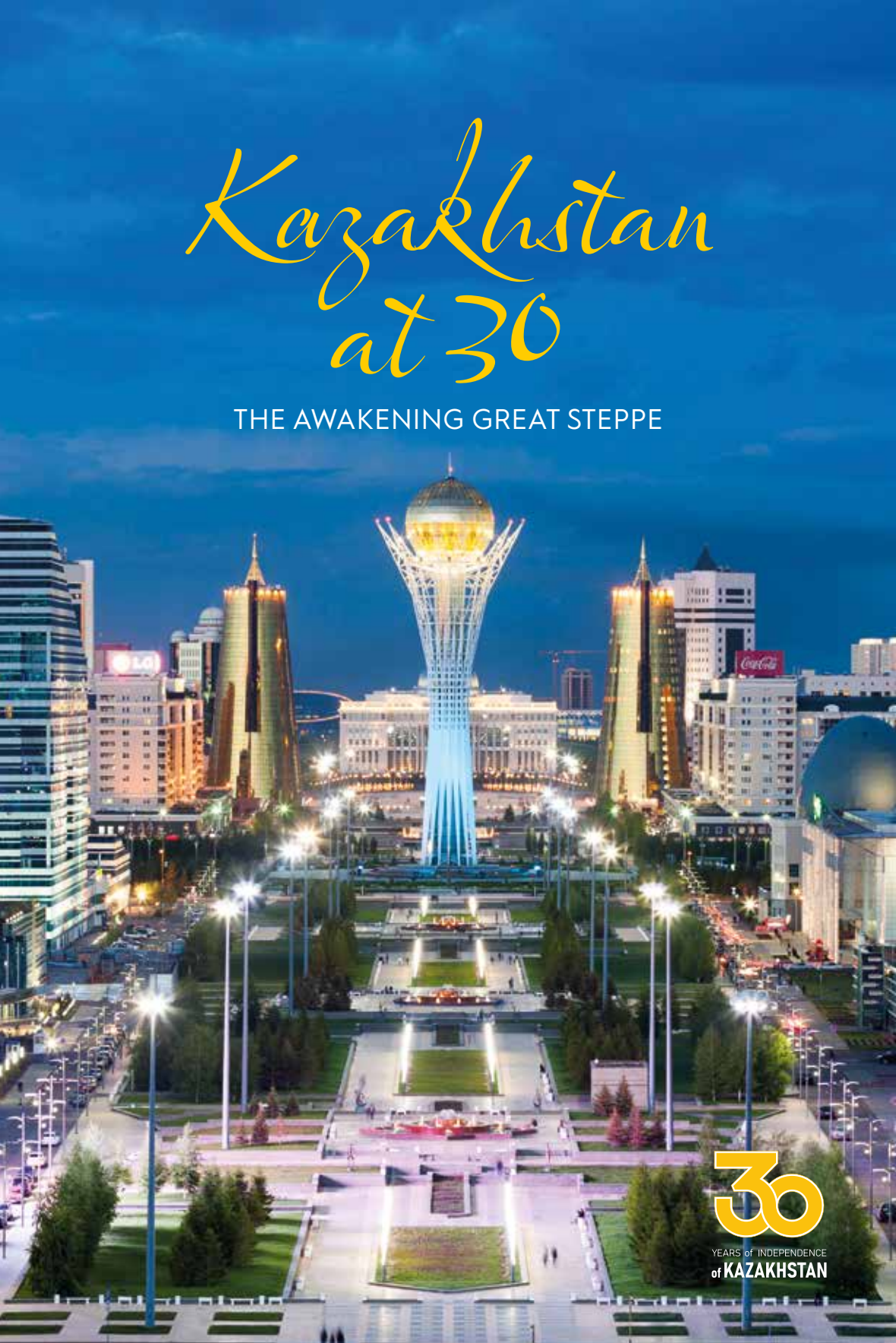
# Kazakhstan at 30

## THE AWAKENING GREAT STEPPE



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## THE AWAKENING GREAT STEPPE

30 YEARS of INDEPENDENCE of KAZAKHSTAN

EMBASSY OF KAZAKHSTAN



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Qazaq Eli Monument in Nur-Sultan.

Chapter 1

# Introduction

Professor PETER FRANKOPAN

'A STRONG MAN MAY DEFEAT A HUNDRED ENEMIES', wrote the great Kazakh intellectual Abai Qunanbaiuly; 'but a learned one a thousand.' Perhaps not surprisingly, an academic is bound to agree strongly with such well-chosen words. Knowledge and education count for a great deal in helping us understand other people – and help us also understand ourselves.

When the Soviet Union collapsed 30 years ago, knowledge of the cultures and peoples of the steppes beyond the Soviet bloc was minimal. Things have improved, albeit slowly. High profile exhibitions such as '*Gold of the Great Steppe: People, Power and Production*' that opened at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in September 2021 or the Scythian exhibition at the British Museum four years earlier opened eyes and minds to the sophistication, wealth and resilience of nomadic and settled peoples who have lived on the plains of Central Asia for thousands of years.

For many, however, Central Asia in general and Kazakhstan in particular are *terra incognita*, strange and unknown lands, once home to exotic traders moving from one oasis to another and now the source of immense natural resources, minerals and financial opportunity. This is a source of frustration to the those who work on this region and are often at pains to underline local complexities, and keen to provide nuance and context to simplistic and over-optimistic claims that are usually statements of intent, rather than of reality.

Many commentators pay considerably more attention to opportunities than to challenges in the future of Kazakhstan and of the wider region as well. While there is nothing wrong with seeing a cup as half full rather than half empty, doing so can become a very tempting habit to indulge – as sharp-eyed readers of this volume may recognise. This imbalance comes, at least in part, from the lack of education and focus on Kazakh history, literature, art and culture in

universities, that can in result in the tendency to apply gloss and eulogise, and to pass over more tricky issues in silence.

That is why books like Nick Fielding's *Travellers in the Great Steppe* are so important, as they introduce and remind readers of connections deep into the past and seeing how past societies in Central Asia were linked to other parts of the world through trade routes, as well as the spread of faiths, ideas, technologies and language. The peoples of the steppes have dealt for thousands of years with outsiders hoping to bring their own agendas to a world of lucrative contracts, expensive goods and patronage networks; as anyone knows who has travelled in this region, famed for the hospitality, generosity and kindness of its inhabitants, taking the time and trouble to learn about the songs, the food and the history of the people is not just a sign of equality but of respect.

The starting point of understanding any people, culture or region of course comes with study and knowledge of history. This is particularly important in the case of Kazakhstan, where it is easy to ignore the traumas of the last century and in doing so to misunderstand the world of the present.

While it is hardly surprising that the glories of the Silk Roads are at the forefront of public imaginations of Central Asia, the last century has been one of profound difficulty and pain for the many peoples living in the steppelands and the heart of Asia. The Russian Revolutions of 1917 marked the start of decades of catastrophic suffering as a result of forced collectivisation, brutal re-settlement policies and persistent, systematic ethnic persecution. The contribution of Kazakhstan to the defeat of Germany and its allies in the Second World War is little known and less commented on, despite the fact that five times as many civilians died in Kazakhstan as in the United Kingdom, and the Kazakhs sustained almost as many casualties in battle as the British did in Europe, North Africa, Burma and elsewhere.

Under the Soviet Union, the environmental exploitation of Central Asia as a whole came at the price of soil erosion, depletion of water resources and pollution whose effects in many cases will be exacerbated further still by climate change. Those who know the region well note too that these are regional issues, and warn that they will require regional solutions and agreement – with obvious consequences if such agreements do not materialise.

Taken as a whole, therefore, the distance travelled by Kazakhstan since the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 has been remarkable.

The achievements and developments in terms of modernisation, infrastructure investment and economic growth have been extraordinarily impressive – especially when set against the difficulties that engulfed the international banking system at the end of the 1990s, the global financial crisis a decade later and the problems posed by the pandemic that swept around the world in 2020.

In addition, Kazakhstan's heavy reliance on commodity prices has also led to an economy that was poorly diversified and liable to market risks and to the vagaries of global geopolitics that can make navigation forwards and planning ahead difficult. Trying to solve this equation has been one of the main stories of the last 30 years.

Understanding that helps explain the underlying tension that is ever-present in Kazakhstan, of ambition on the one hand, and of concern on the other. This is most clearly manifested in areas of social development – such as press freedom, human rights and political opposition. For some the pace of change is too slow, with long-promised reforms either failing to deliver results or being delayed, watered down, or both. For others, change represents unacceptable risk, expressed with reminders that transformation brought about organically is preferable and more sustainable than when delivered through revolution.

Finding that balance is not easy either in a context of regional upheaval, such as in Afghanistan, or domestic turbulence in Kyrgyzstan, let alone one of rising Chinese ambition through the Belt and Road Initiative, of greater attention being paid by Russia to its southern borders, of a more active Iranian foreign policy than we have seen for many years, and also rising challenges of radicalisation and technological change.

Kazakhstan's vast size is also enormously challenging, both because of demographics, with a very uneven population distribution, and also because of the cost of hard infrastructure for communications across regions that are not hundreds, but even thousands of kilometres apart. Providing investment into roads, schools and hospitals is logistically challenging and also expensive, as are the costs of building refineries, pipelines and export and transit corridors.

On top of that too, of course, are differences – not only between rural and urban populations, but also between regions, as there are many communities with proud local identities and histories whose participation and involvement in Kazakhstan of the 21st century cannot simply be taken for granted: they need

to be included, respected, persuaded and to come along for the next chapter of Kazakhstan's history.

For now, 30 years on from the end of the USSR, it is not only worth celebrating the many successes and achievements made by Kazakhstan since independence – it is important to do so. Under President Nazarbayev's leadership, Kazakhstan became an independent state, rising from the ground upwards, issuing a new currency, building a new apparatus to gather taxes and make investments; it had to negotiate with some of the largest, most powerful and most experienced conglomerates in the world to get reasonable terms to form joint ventures and bring in precious foreign capital and expertise; it had to create, train and manage a diplomatic corps deployed around the world to represent its interests and to help win friends and build alliances. And along the way, Kazakhstan became one of only four countries (along with South Africa, Belarus and Ukraine) to have given up nuclear weapons voluntarily, setting an example that the rest of the world might learn from.

Many who watched as this happened doubted that such changes would be effective, or even that they would happen at all. And yet over 30 years, standards of living have risen steadily and substantially. Massive investments have helped develop cities like Nur-Sultan into oases of the 21st century, rather than creaking cities fit for the past. Kazakh diplomats around the world – such as H.E. Erlan Idrissov – have become famous for their charm and their energy, fostering interest and respect for their fellow citizens back at home, while encouraging scholars, friends and potential friends abroad to learn about the Kazakh people and culture. Notably too, considerable thought and effort goes into the process of listening and learning, with the Astana Economic Forum just one of several initiatives designed to foster dialogue at the highest level from governments around the world.

The question now, of course, is what the next 30 years will bring. Ambitious proposed political and economic reforms have been slowed down or waylaid by the pandemic, and much will depend on whether the return to normal life will bring about an acceleration or a convenient moment to pause to re-consider. The emergence and resilience of opposition parties that can offer alternative visions for the future and hold government officials to account is important too since this has a direct and positive effect on the continued professionalisation, transparency and efficiency of the state.

Development of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and civil society still leaves much to be desired. Restrictions on the right to hold public meetings, crackdowns on those who are critical either of the government as a whole or of individual officials, and visa bans show there is still a long way to go in terms of opening up society to allow higher levels of accountability and transparency. In doing so, this also bottles up problems of marginalisation, persecution and prejudice that Kazakhs do not need explaining to them, following their own experiences in the 20th century.

Mistakes often get made by governments, by officials and by corporations all around the world. What matters is how one owns up to and then learns from those. This is why the stability of societies is closely linked to how open they are, and conversely, why states that tend to be concerned about problems and accountability can be fragile.

As Abai Qunanbaiuly so eloquently put it, knowledge and learning are cornerstones for happiness, progress and success. So as Kazakhs and Kazakhstan celebrate the milestone of 30 years of independence and the considerable and impressive progress that has been made since 1991, I look forward to reading the follow-up volume in 2041 which will mark 50 years on from the fall of the Soviet Union. Like all good historians, I know that the future matters just as much as the past.

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Part of Anthony Jenkinson's map of Central Asia.

A rider in the Great Steppe.

Chapter 2

# Exploring the Great Steppe

NICK FIELDING

For much of the twentieth century the vast steppelands of Central Asia, often shown on contemporary maps as featureless semi-arid deserts, were also an intellectual blank – regions that were unknown, outside the experience of most observers and travellers and therefore of little consequence. Their incorporation into first, the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union and the consequent geopolitical sensitivities meant that even as large parts of the world opened up for tourism, travel to 'the Stans', as they were often referred to, was restricted to specialist travellers, usually in supervised groups.

Even then, their destinations were usually the fabled cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, or occasionally to Turkmenistan, where architectural students and rug and textile collectors alike could indulge their passions. Vast areas to the north and east barely saw a tourist at all during these years. Kazakhstan, the largest of the Central Asian states and itself bigger than Europe, was hardly known in the West, and then mainly as the location of Soviet atomic weapons tests or as the site of Russia's primary rocket-launching base at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

And yet there is a rich and diverse history of travel and exploration in the steppelands that stretch right across Asia. Of course, we have all heard about the Great Game and Anglo-Russian rivalry, but that is only a tiny part of the story. Hundreds of years before Central Asia's incorporation into first the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union, travellers had brought back remarkable tales. Writing as far back as the 4th century BCE, Herodotus, although he never travelled himself much beyond the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, accurately described in detail the life of the Scythian tribes that lived on the steppe, including the fact that they drank fermented mare's milk – still very popular throughout Central Asia – and lived in yurts.

Both Chinese and Indian travellers explored the great steppelands in the following centuries. Indeed, it was only by crossing these vast areas that Buddhism was taken from India to China. As demonstrated by the many monuments that still exist, Buddhism flourished at least as far north as Semey (once known as Semipalatinsk) on the borders of what is now Siberia. And as the various Chinese dynasties in the first millennium of the Christian era

A Kazakh 'woman of the common people' by Johan Peter Falck.

gradually extended their influence into these areas, their scholars compiled detailed descriptions of both the lands and the peoples who inhabited them.

During the Middle Ages Europe's rulers became both obsessed with Central Asia and terrified of its inhabitants. In the early 13th century, they had been horrified to discover that there was a powerful ruler to the east whose vast hordes of mounted cavalry were more than a match for their armies. The Mongols under Genghis Khan shook Europe to its foundation and for much of the century represented an existential threat to the patchwork of Western European kingdoms. Envoys sent by a succession of kings and Popes to the Mongol capital, Karakorum, brought back even more detailed reports of steppe life and the first descriptions of the pastoralism that had flourished there for more than 5,000 years. Franciscans John of Piano Carpini and Friar William of Rubruck both made the journey across southern Russia before heading out into the Great Steppe and then through what is now the south-eastern Zhetysu region of Kazakhstan and on, through the Djungarian Gap, to Karakorum. Later, Nicolo and Paulo Polo, the father and uncle of Marco Polo, followed a similar path on their way to the Mongol court.

A Kazakh of the Middle Horde by Johan Peter Falck.

John Castle's portrait of Khan Abul Khayir.

It was inveterate merchants and traders from Venice and Genoa, epitomised by Marco Polo, who first understood the importance of the trade routes across Central Asia and began to refer to them as the Silk Road. And that is also what drew the first English merchant adventurers to the region. They could see the extent of the lucrative trade and also how closely it was controlled by the Italian merchants. Anthony Jenkinson and other Elizabethans believed they could divert the trade from China northwards to Russia as a way of breaking the Italian stranglehold over the supply of silk and other luxury goods. Jenkinson made it as far as the Caspian Sea and then Bokhara, but the plans of the newly formed Muscovy Company came to nothing, although Jenkinson's famous map remains a wonder from this period. It would eventually be the discovery of the maritime trade routes and the strength of the Royal Navy that would finally break the Silk Road monopoly and establish Britain as a major trading nation.

The growing importance of the maritime routes to the East from the sixteenth century onwards, combined with the internal collapse of the Mongol Empire, saw the Silk Road diminish in importance. The safety of the once-huge camel trains that crossed the remote deserts could no longer be guaranteed against marauders and they declined, increasingly reduced to serving mainly local markets. Not until the early eighteenth century did merchant adventurers once again return to the steppe. At the same time, Russia was beginning its long southward expansion, determined to stabilise its southern border and bring the unruly steppe tribes and potentates under its control.

We are indebted to a rather strange Anglo-German adventurer and artist for one of the most detailed accounts of life in the Great Steppe at this time. John Castle – sometimes Castell – managed to attach himself to Russia's Orenburg Expedition that in the 1730s made the first attempt to reach an agreement with the Kazakh tribes inhabiting the lands to the south of the Urals. Although Castle himself seems to have had delusions of grandeur, his descriptions of life amongst the nomads of the Junior *juz* (horde) of the Kazakhs remain some of the best ever written. Castle met personally with Abul Khayir, Khan of the Junior *juz*, and even attempted to negotiate a treaty with him – although his efforts were mocked by the Russians. His painting of Abul Khayir, now in a Moscow museum, was the first known portrait of a Kazakh chieftain and his description of daily life and the customs of the nomads are both accurate and entertaining.

Lithograph by Thomas Witlam Atkinson: *A group of Kazakhs with two brides.*

Castle was followed by a succession of merchants from the Russia Company, once again intent on claiming a share of the trade that flourished in parts of Central Asia. Jonas Hanway and Captain John Elton were amongst them, but Russian fears of growing Persian influence in the Caspian and beyond scuppered their plans.

The Russian Tsars' efforts to understand and exploit their vastly expanded Empire at this time led to a huge increase in interest in the Great Steppe. In the late 1700s Peter Simon Pallas organised a substantial group of brilliant scientists to criss-cross the empire, map it, measure it and explore it for gold, silver and other valuable metals and minerals. Mapmakers, ethnographers and adventurers were followed by the military and then by settlers and administrators. The Swede, Johann Peter Falk, a disciple of Linnaeus, was one of those who travelled to the steppe and brought back both descriptions and paintings of the people he met. Johann Sievers, a German pharmacist and botanist, reached Lake Alakol – now in eastern Kazakhstan – in 1794, discovering in the nearby Djungar Alatau Mountains the apple variety that now bears his name. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the great German geographers Alexander


Swiss traveller and collector Henri Moser

von Humboldt and Karl Ritter published substantial works on Central Asia. The naturalist Gregory Karelin followed, and his botanical specimens can still be seen at the Komarov Botanical Institute in St Petersburg.

Gradually, a relationship developed between the three branches of the Kazakh horde and the Russians. In exchange for Russian protection from their mortal foes, the Djungars, the Kazakhs were increasingly willing to allow Russian influence – and later colonisation – to expand.

By the mid-nineteenth century Russia had control over much of the northern steppe region, having cemented ties with the Kazakh tribal federations. Further south, the emirs of Khiva, Khokand, Bukhara and Samarkand continued to create problems, imposing taxes on the tribes and regularly mounting raids into their territories to capture slaves and livestock. These were the prevailing conditions when the British couple Thomas and Lucy Atkinson made their pioneering first foray into the Great Steppe in the late 1840s. By this time Tsar Nicholas I of Russia had built a cordon of military bases from west to east along the line of the Irtisch River in southern Siberia and was moving his troops south along what was then the poorly demarcated border with China. The

William Bateson's photograph of a Kazakh nomad; Henry Lansdell in Bokharan armour and dressed in Turkoman costume.

Atkinsons, who travelled south from Barnaul in southern Siberia in the wake of the armed columns, spent almost a year in the Djungar Alatau Mountains, exploring the rivers and passes and meeting with many of the tribal leaders. Thomas Atkinson's portraits of the Kazakh nobles he met are unique and his and Lucy's descriptions of their extensive journeys, during which Lucy gave birth to a son, provide some of the most delightful and informative accounts of these remote regions.

Even in the mid-nineteenth century the Great Steppe was still usually described as Western Siberia. Further east, the lands under Chinese domination were known as Oriental Siberia. It was not until the 1860s that the region was officially renamed Turkestan by the Russians. By then, they had a much clearer idea of its geography and peoples, not least because of the efforts of a young Kazakh from a noble family who had joined the Russian Cadet Corps at Omsk and spent most of the rest of his short life in Russian military service. Chokan Chingisuly Valikhanov died in 1865 at the young age of just 29, but even by this time he had made his mark through a series of remarkable journeys into regions never before visited by outsiders. Travelling in disguise, Valikhanov brought back new details about the khanates in Chinese Turkestan, thus allowing the Russians to work out the intentions of the khans and use this information to their advantage and eventually to conquer or contain them.

The Russian campaigns to conquer the khanates took decades. Vast distances, lack of roads and provisions and the terrifying climate – freezing in winter and scorching in summer – took their toll. It required extraordinary logistical efforts. Tens of thousands of camels were hired from Kazakhs to transport men and equipment. The losses during the campaigns were so huge that for years afterwards the caravan trade was devastated. And for the first time, professional observers, in the form of journalists like Januarius Macgahan and diplomats like the American Eugene Schuyler, were there to witness and record events for posterity.

Once the Russians had conquered the Central Asian khanates and suppressed the raids, more European adventurers began to arrive. Xavier and Adele Hommaire de Hell were the most prominent of many French travellers. Xavier's interest, like Pallas before him and others since, was in the vast bodies of water in Central Asia – the Caspian, Black and Aral Seas, and lakes such as Balkash, Alakol and Zaisan. Had they once been a single body of water as the

Woodcut by Thomas Witlam Atkinson: *Discussing the journey to Nur Zaisan.*

Ancient Greeks believed? Even today, the answer is uncertain. The English army officer Major Herbert Wood joined a Russian expedition on the Syr Darya River in 1874 to look into exactly this question. In the 1880s Cambridge biologist William Bateson spent 18 months looking for fossilised watersnail shells in what is now northern Kazakhstan in an attempt to prove that a single body of water has once existed there. His book, *Letters from the Steppe*, provides a wonderful portrait of steppe life at that time.

As Russian troops relentlessly made their way south, towards Afghanistan and Britain's Indian Empire, tensions between the two powers rose inexorably. Not surprisingly, British travellers were discouraged, only to be replaced by a slew of 'more acceptable' French men and women. After the de Hells came the remarkable Marie de Ujfalvy-Bourdon. In 1876, she decided to accompany her husband, a renowned ethnographer, on a journey to Central Asia. Dressed in her finest explorer's costume, she travelled to Baku, crossed the Caspian and initially made her way to Bokhara and Samarkand before heading further east into Semirecheye and reaching as far as Kuldja in Chinese Turkestan. Henri Moser from Switzerland, scion of the famous watchmaking family, also travelled extensively in the Great Steppe, amassing a stunning collection of arms, costumes and metalware that is now on view in the Berne Historical

Museum. In 1880 Gabriel Bonvalot made his first journey to Central Asia, travelling by *tarantass* from Ekaterinburg in the Urals to Tashkent, and then on towards the Altai before heading to Verniye (now Almaty) and then back towards Samarkand and Bokhara before returning to Europe.

Another remarkable traveller from this time was the English priest Henry Lansdell. An inveterate traveller, Lansdell had taken it upon himself to visit every prison and post house in Siberia and Turkestan in order to distribute religious tracts, including translations of the bible. The Russians were particularly sensitive about missionaries, so Lansdell agreed not to preach during his three major journeys, which took him many years and which covered tens of thousands of miles. Lansdell, who travelled alone, was one of those great Victorian collectors. As well as amassing huge amounts of detailed information and some wonderful garments, he also brought back with him scientific specimens of birds, fish, insects and plants, now held in the collections of the British Museum and Natural History Museum in London. Lansdell was one of the first travellers to take photographs on his journey and his magic lantern slideshows were hugely popular on his return to England. His photographs are some of the earliest taken in Central Asia.

By the 1890s visitors from Europe were able to take the Transcaspian Railroad all the way to Samarkand and Bokhara. Napoleon Ney's book *En Asie Central a la Vapeur* boasts that he travelled from Paris to Samarkand and back again in 1888 in just 43 days. In 1899 Robert Louis Jefferson cycled from London to Khiva, intent on repeating the famous journey by Captain Fred

A Kalmyk lama from Hommaire de Hell's book on the Caspian.

Butter merchant and mountaineer Samuel Turner.

Interior of a yurt from Hommaire de Hell's book on the Caspian.

Burnaby, who had reached the city on horseback in the winter of 1875. If you wanted an exotic holiday in the 1890s, where better than the Great Steppe?

Even before the end of the nineteenth century enterprising businessmen realised that there were fortunes to be made in the steppe. Amateur Alpinist Samuel Turner was drawn to the region by the prospect of buying butter, which was then transported in refrigerated trains to Europe. In his spare time, he was able to climb in the Altai Mountains. Gold and silver had already been found and soon there was a rush for the valuable minerals that lay in huge deposits – coal at Karagandy and copper at the nearby Spassky and Uspenskky mines, in particular. British mining companies used camels to transport steam engines, furnaces and other equipment to remote mining sites, stationing their engineers and chemists (and their families) in the mining camps for several years at a time. The memoirs of E Nelson Fell and J W Wardell give a good idea of conditions in these camps in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution in 1917. Both wrote extensively about the Kazakhs they met during their sojourn on the steppe, their lives and customs.

Even before the start of the First World War, conditions in the steppe were becoming increasingly difficult for travellers. The arrival of tens of thousands of Russian peasant colonisers had created tensions with the nomads whose traditional way of life was already under threat. Without vast areas on which to graze their flocks it was untenable. The Russian Revolution itself was preceded by an uprising on the steppes, ruthlessly suppressed by the Russians. And while the Revolution

promised better times for the nomads, it soon became clear that for the leaders in Moscow, the steppes were seen as a place where provisions could be secured – by whatever means necessary – to feed the city dwellers to the north. Inevitably, famine followed and with it, yet another wave of foreigners arrived, this time as aid workers, trying to ameliorate the worst excesses of the requisitioners. Young idealist Ralph Fox was one of them and his book *People of the Steppe* paints a bleak picture of conditions in the early 1920s. His was one of the last accounts of life on the Great Steppe to be written by an outsider for over 80 years.

And that is how things remained for much of the twentieth century. The Soviet Union closed off much of the steppe for its atomic weapons tests and rocket launches. Nomadism was discouraged to the point of obliteration and the once-tribal society was submerged beneath a torrent of incomers. By the 1980s more than half the population of Kazakhstan was made up of Russians. The Kazakh language had been marginalised, along with much of the steppe culture. Of course, not all was bad. Education and health care were much improved and standards of living for most people rose.

But the stultifying stagnation of the Soviet era was evident everywhere. Only in the aftermath of its collapse did the beauty of this vast region once again become apparent to modern travellers. Slowly the steppelands have reopened. The worst of the nuclear testing detritus has been removed. The great wilderness areas are still there, as are the almost untouched mountain regions of the Tian Shan, the Alatau and the Tarbagatai. Great flocks of flamingos and pelicans can still be seen on the thousands of lakes that lie scattered like confetti across the steppe. There are even plans to reintroduce wild tigers to areas in the east that last saw them 70 years ago. Despite all the appearances of modernity, so striking in the capital Nur-Sultan, Kazakhs remain connected to their ancestry and their geography. Their national outlook, in particular their ability to find 'another way' and to resolve problems, stems directly from the vast openness of the steppelands, a place where there are no boundaries other than those imposed from outside.

*Nick Fielding is a former Sunday Times journalist, traveller, and author of 'Travellers in the Great Steppe: from the Papal Envoys to the Russian Revolution'.*

Kazakh eagle hunters.

A hunter and his dog race across the steppe.


Khorgos Gateway dry port: the new entry to Kazakhstan from the East.

Chapter 3

# Kazakhstan's role in the revived Silk Road: From silk and spices to digital payments and data

NISHA BISWAL and JENNIFER MIEL

If geography is destiny, then Kazakhstan's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and the Far East accurately envisages the country's future. Bordering Russia and China, Kazakhstan provides an expansive land bridge connecting two continents and vital economic centers. The ancient Silk Road has been recast to position Kazakhstan as a modernised two-way transit hub linking heavy industry with consumers along both physical and digital infrastructure. Kazakhstan provides excellent access to the fastest growing market in the world within a market economy fueled by hydrocarbons, yet thirsty for diversification. This chapter explores new prospects for Kazakhstan building on its emerging infrastructure and logistical competitive advantage in energy and mining, agriculture and the digital economy. An analysis of opportunities for US investment partnerships reveals that Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy extends to effectively managing commercial and economic relations within the development of the New Silk Road.

## Infrastructure and Logistics

In 2014, Kazakhstan's First President Nursultan Nazarbayev unveiled *Nurly Zhol* or "Bright Path", an ambitious package of economic reforms and infrastructure investments worth $9 billion[1]. With the first part of these upgrades to road, rail and basic services complete, Kazakhstan has unveiled a second tranche of *Nurly Zhol* projects totaling $12.6 billion and aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In fact, it was Nazarbayev who first proposed reviving old Silk Road trading routes,[2] a grandiose project that China's President Xi

Jinping embraced when he formally announced the BRI from Kazakhstan's capital in 2013. The two countries opened the Khorgos Gateway trade zone along Kazakhstan's eastern border with China to provide the first and last step to and from European seaports. This combined dry port, logistics and industrial zone allows traders to access intermodal freight transport, by both rail and road.

According to PwC, Kazakhstan's greatest opportunities along the New Silk Road will come from transit revenues and new export markets.[3] The sustainability of the Khorgos Gateway and continued reforms remain paramount to Kazakhstan's ability to modernise regional trade routes and realise both objectives. The journey across Kazakhstan saves both time and money when compared with maritime or air cargo from China to Europe—about half the time as by sea and significantly cheaper when compared with air freight.[4]

Reportedly, 70 percent of land transit between China and Europe passes through Kazakhstan.[5] There is a hidden benefit here, in that unused return cargo capacity can be acquired cheaply, allowing Kazakh producers to export cheaper

than ever before and giving rise to a new ecosystem of industries throughout Central Asia.[6] At the same time Central Asian connectivity is rapidly improving. Data indicates approximately 80 percent of cargo passing through the Khorgos Dry Port is destined for former Soviet states, with Uzbekistan accounting for 35-40 percent.[7] This enhanced regional connectivity combined with the domestic infrastructure upgrades demonstrates how Khorgos can serve as an example of how host nations can benefit from China's BRI on their own terms.[8]

North-South regional connectivity between Central Asia's two largest economies, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is also progressing as an outgrowth of the revitalised Silk Road. New projects such as the Central Asia International Centre for Trade and Economic Cooperation at Zhibek Zholy offer a future bilateral industrial, trade and logistics platform along the southern Kazakhstan border closest to Tashkent, Uzbekistan.[9] According to recent agreements, there are plans to increase bilateral trade to $10 billion through enhanced cross border trade, joint investments, the opening of three wholesale distribution centers and tourism.


Rail terminus at Khorgos Gateway. Containers are transferred from Chinese to Kazakh trains at Khorgos, due to different track gauges.

Continued integration of Afghanistan into the Central Asian economies offers opportunities to reimagine North-South trade routes along the Silk Road connecting Kazakhstan with India and Pakistan. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline under construction is one such project, with the idea originating from international oil companies operating in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan seeking an alternative route for future energy developments. Afghanistan also serves as a strong agricultural market for Kazakhstan's wheat, grains and livestock.

The Covid-19 pandemic and incidents like the Suez Canal blockage have underscored the urgent need to build more resilient global supply chains. The World Bank has pointed out that the new supply chain, "builds upon the delivery of logistics services according to market principles and modern trade- and transport-related institutions".[10] Kazakhstan's infrastructure such as the Khorgos Gateway and the country's diversifying industrial base have a prominent role to play within this framework. Key metrics to its success are greater logistics performance, value chain optimisation, digitisation and efficient customs and trade facilitation policy reforms – all areas being advanced within the framework of the US-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).[11]

## Development Investments

In addition to China's BRI investments, US interests in a prosperous and stable Central Asia have attracted new investments into Kazakhstan's infrastructure and logistics sectors. The new US development bank, the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC), has equity authority and an increased portfolio cap compared to its predecessor, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). DFC is being used to put a greater emphasis on both physical and digital infrastructure in Kazakhstan. In partnership with the government of Kazakhstan and Astana International Financial Center (AIFC), the DFC announced its intent to invest at least $1 billion over a period of five years through the Central Asia Investment Partnership. The aim is to stimulate high-quality, private-sector growth in Central Asia and the broader region by supporting infrastructure projects that increase economic connectivity and promote inclusive, transparent, and sustainable investments.[12] Such projects

will likely require Blue Dot Network Certification, as a counterpoint to the BRI[13], an important advantage when seeking financing.

This new Central Asia Investment Partnership follows a solid track record of US private sector investment with Kazakhstan government entities. According to Andrey Kurilin, chairman of the management board of Citi Kazakhstan, "In the last 30 years, Kazakhstan became one of the emerging markets with a great potential: in terms of growth, its GDP is up several times and the FDI attraction is $350 billion as reported. That—along with a developed financial infrastructure, low taxes, a unique location on the regional trade crossroads and wide recognition within international capital markets—makes Kazakhstan a convincing case in any discussion about economic partnership and business potential." He added that the Kazakh authorities have maintained "a regular and candid dialogue with international investors" and have been emphasising their interest in diversifying the economy towards consumer-oriented industries and non-commodity exports.

## Energy and Mining

The energy and mining sectors act as a fulcrum in Kazakhstan's economy. For a landlocked country with the Caspian Sea as its only access point to water, the revived Silk Road rail, road and pipeline networks provide a lifeline for trading the country's abundant natural resources. Kazakhstan sits atop some of the world's largest reserves of hydrocarbons (coal, crude and gas) and mineral earths. Throughout the country's 30-year history, the energy and mining industries have attracted the most investment. Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium, holding the second largest uranium reserves, in addition to lead and zinc deposits.[14] It has been said that 99 of the 110 elements in the periodic table can be found in Kazakhstan's soil. In fact, 90 percent of the rare earth metals found in a smartphone are native to Kazakhstan.[15]

All told, 60% of foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan is in the hydrocarbons sector, which accounts for 50% of the country's export revenue.[16] Both figures can be expanded upon through enhanced regional transit networks. Kazakhstan's oil and gas megaprojects include the offshore Kashagan field along the Caspian Sea – which, at more than $50 billion, is the largest single international investment in the country – and two onshore fields, Tengiz and

Karachaganak. US oil company Chevron and partners are investing $45 billion in expanding Tengiz and have been developing this project since the founding days of Kazakhstan's republic.[17]

In total, there are 30 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves – 1.8 per cent of the world total – and three operational refineries in Kazakhstan. Given this wealth of natural resources, both onshore and offshore oil and gas services offer opportunities for international firms.

A network of pipelines transits more than 75% of Kazakhstan's crude oil into Europe through Russia and via Azerbaijan after being shipped across the Caspian Sea.[18] The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) connects Kazakhstan's oil from the Tengiz and Karachaganak fields overland through Russia, crossing the Black Sea into Europe. The Southern Gas Corridor project connects Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, carrying Kazakhstan's hydrocarbons through Turkey into the broader European market for consumption. Piped crude also travels to China, though in smaller volumes. Overall, Kazakhstan delivers oil and gas both East

and West via a pipeline carrying Central Asian gas to China and over land and sea via the Bosphorus Straits into Europe.

Natural gas potential has also grown in recent years, both domestically and internationally. Whereas major cities in Kazakhstan previously imported natural gas from Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, greater integration within Kazakhstan's network of pipelines has opened up further natural gas export opportunities into China via the Central Asia Centre (CAC) pipeline that began in 2017.[19]

A new ministry formed in 2019 that focuses exclusively on Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources and is responsible for environmental protection policy, "green economy" development and waste management signals Kazakhstan's multivector energy diplomacy. Central Asia is likely to play a significant role in reducing short-lived climate pollutants like methane. President Tokayev has set a target of generating 10 percent of electricity from renewable sources by 2030, reducing emissions by 15 percent by 2030, and achieving net-zero carbon neutrality by 2060. The country is facing a number of energy transition

PetroKazakhstan oil processing plant at Shymkent.

Natural gas storage tanks, Zhanazhol, Aktobe Region.

choices as to what the low carbon pathway should look like and what would be required to achieve it. Continued dialogue and collaboration with international organisations such as the UN, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will be critical to achieving these goals.

### Agriculture

Rather than being a transit country along the Silk Road, Kazakhstan now has growing industries to contribute to trade along these historic routes. Agriculture and livestock have perhaps the most untapped potential in Kazakhstan's economy, given that the country has the fifth largest endowment of agricultural lands in the world consisting of 25 million hectares of arable land and more than 70 million acres of pasture land, with only 30 percent currently used.[20] Building on these fundamentals, major US multinationals Tyson Foods, Valmont, The Coca-Cola Company, Mars and John Deere have taken steps to invest in the agriculture and food industry in Kazakhstan, in which the Kazakh government offers attractive investment incentives, among priority sectors for economic diversification.[21]

Agricultural trade can multiply in both directions along the Silk Road, towards both China and Russia. Currently agriculture and livestock exports to both countries total $9 billion.[22] In 2019, the agricultural sector accounted for approximately 4.5 percent of Kazakhstan's economic production, with nearly 30 percent of working incomes from 2 million people coming from the agricultural sector.[23] Kazakhstan is among the leading wheat and grain producers in the world, exporting to more than 70 countries[24]. Greater investment in wheat processing plants and livestock can further add value to Kazakhstan's exports. In particular, livestock production, to provide meat to Chinese, Russian and Central Asian markets, is seen as a key growth export area. Kazakhstan has earned a $500 million World Bank loan for sustainable livestock development focused on beef production.[25]

### Digitisation

Kazakhstan is developing a complementary 'Digital Silk Road' through its Digital Kazakhstan initiative, centred on a reliable, affordable, widespread

Wheat harvesting in North Kazakhstan Region.

internet infrastructure throughout the country.[26] President Tokayev has been keen to voice support for Kazakhstan accelerating digitalisation efforts, with aspirations to become a regional hub for big data, artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, internet of things, and supercomputers.[27] Kazakhstan's telecommunications stand out as the regional leader in Central Asia, which provide a strong foundation to create an information superhighway.

The Digital Silk Road promises to enhance opportunities for businesses, government and the general public. Greater connectivity and mobile broadband enables new business models, illustrated by the rise of Kaspi Bank, Kazakhstan's ubiquitous fintech startup super-app. Kaspi is transforming digital payments and e-commerce following a $2 billion IPO on the London Stock Exchange. Goldman Sachs was an early investor in the company while Citi and Morgan Stanley helped sell the company's stock to US investors. Smart city technologies leveraging AI are reportedly improving traffic and overall safety in Kazakhstan. Greater digital literacy throughout the country will help grow the local market of consumers, new startups and IT clusters to reduce the digital divide and job displacement.

The next step of digitalisation revolves around 5G networks, which encompasses the Internet of Things with connected devices. Thus, 5G networks make ironclad cybersecurity an imperative. Kazakhstan appears to be open to deploying 5G networks from both Chinese infrastructure such as Huawei, and the Blue Dot Network certified operators and projects, promoted by the US, Japan and Australia.[28] Blue Dot Network certified projects will be particularly important within the context of the Central Asia Investment Partnership between the AIFC and DFC.

Overall, data transit and data transfer frameworks aligned with free market economies can position Kazakhstan as a relative oasis on the Digital Silk Road compared with data restrictions in neighbouring Russia and China. Yet, demand for data residency is growing in Kazakhstan in response to data protection laws.

## Conclusion

According to PwC, "the rapid revival of the Silk Road, and massive infrastructure spending over the next decade, however, forebode the re-emergence of Kazakhstan as a trading hub in Central Asia."[29] Investment in infrastructure and logistics, energy and mining, agriculture, and digitalisation offer new transit nodes and links for Kazakhstan to emerge as a balancing force in the BRI. Kazakhstan's new currency of connectivity leverages its multi-vector commercial diplomacy, strategic land-linked location, and ties with the United States to reimagine the Silk Road with a reorientation toward China, Central Asian states, Russia, and Western Europe all at once.

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Chapter 4

# First President Nursultan Nazarbayev

JONATHAN AITKEN

The description "father of his country" is an historical title of great distinction and rarity. George Washington can claim it in the United States; Chairman Mao in the People's Republic of China and perhaps a handful of national leaders in smaller countries.

The 30th Anniversary of the birth of the Republic of Kazakhstan provides a good opportunity to assess Nursultan Nazarbayev's status in the pantheon of statesmen who are acclaimed as "Founding Fathers".

Back in 2008, soon after I had completed my biography of President Nazarbayev and when he was still in office, I suggested to him that he might deserve a place among the acclaimed founders of new nation states in modern times. He demurred. So I reminded him of a quotation from the Greek philosopher Socrates who said: "Sometimes one has to wait until the evening to see how the glorious the day has been". President Nazarbayev looked puzzled and asked his interpreter to re-translate the wisdom of Sophocles. Eventually he responded: "But who says I have reached the evening?!"

When I began writing the first ever Western biography of Nursultan Nazarbayev some 15 years ago I was hesitant about giving a judgment or even a rating of approval on his statesmanship. Hesitation is no longer necessary. For it is now clear that the domestic stability and international acceptance of Kazakhstan makes it one of the great success stories of newly created 20th and 21st century nation building – not just in the region of Central Asia but on the world stage. It follows that, as the architect and implementer of this achievement, Nursultan Nazarbayev deserves to be recognised in the international hall of fame honouring the founders of their countries.

So it seems an appropriate anniversary moment to ask the question: What were the forces of inspiration, motivation and practical leadership which

enabled founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev to leave such a remarkable footprint on the sands of history?

An outsider's perspective on such issues may be helpful. Like most Westerners I knew virtually nothing about Kazakhstan until my first visit to Astana (as the capital was then called) in 2006. But for an unusual reason I was well informed about its leader. In the early 1990s I had been Britain's Minister of State for Defence in the Government of Prime Minister John Major. Along with all our NATO partners, we defence specialists were deeply worried about what was called the "loose nukes" problem of the post-Soviet republics.

The suddenly independent state of Kazakhstan was at the heart of this problem for it had overnight become the custodian of over 1200 nuclear warheads for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) stationed on its soil. These weapons of mass destruction, up until December 1991, had been controlled by the Kremlin. They were now in the ownership of Kazakhstan.

The intelligence services and nuclear weapons departments of the Western world were awash with rumours about Kazakhstan's plans, if any, for handling

Nazarbayev sworn in as President for the first time, 25th April 1990.

Signing of the Alma-Ata Protocol, 21st December 1991.

its newly acquired nuclear arsenal. Did the country intend to become a nuclear power in its own right to insure itself against possible hostilities from its predatory neighbours Russia and China? Might it be willing to sell some of its missiles to rogue states such as Libya whose erratic leader Colonel Gaddafi was rumoured to be waving a cheque book before the eyes of the impecunious government of Kazakhstan? Was there a terrorist threat to the safety of these missiles and if so how could it be thwarted?

No one had a clue. The only certainty was that the decision maker on these and many connected strategic issues was Nursultan Nazarbayev.

In the years immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union President Nazarbayev surprised America and its allies by his statesmanship on nuclear issues. In an early meeting with US Secretary of State, James Baker, Nazarbayev explained that he was a leader with a long history of opposition to the stationing of Soviet missiles in Kazakhstan. He had an abhorrence of the horrific damage done to his country and his Kazakh people by irresponsible Soviet nuclear tests in the Semipalatinsk area. He was willing to cooperate fully

with Washington and Moscow on the removal of warheads from Kazakhstan and the eventual nuclear disarmament of his country.

The secret negotiations to achieve these objectives were long and complicated. President Nazarbayev emerged from them with political honour at home and professional respect abroad. The respect from elite players of the worlds' military powers grew into admiration as he delivered his promise to denuclearise his country. So long before he was acclaimed as a domestic leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev was revered as a hero of the late 20th century disarmament movement, particularly among the movers and shakers of the international nuclear priesthood.

Knowing much of this background from my viewpoint as a former Defence Minister, I was intrigued when a publisher approached me about the possibility of writing the life of Nazarbayev. But well though I had regarded him from afar, I was reluctant to accept the challenge of becoming his biographer. As I explained to the President at our first meeting in Astana, to maintain credibility with Western readers I could only write a truthful, accurate, historical

President Nazarbayev meets former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Signing of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, 5th December 1994.

biography. However, I anticipated that any national leader like himself who had been schooled in Soviet or Communist political literature, would expect a propaganda–filled work of hagiography.

President Nazarbayev displayed a sensitive understanding of my author's dilemma. A voracious reader himself, he had managed to be well briefed on my previous Presidential biography – a 670-page life of former US President Richard Nixon. "You managed to write a fair book about Nixon including many criticisms of him. So what is your problem?" asked Nazarbayev.

Inevitably there were a few problems. Freedom of the press in Kazakhstan is not in the same league as press freedom in London or Washington DC. After an intense discussion, which seemed to be heading towards an impasse between potential author and subject, President Nazarbayev said: "So what you are really saying is that I have to trust you. Is that right?" "Yes", I answered. The President lent across the table and brought his face right up close to mine, staring deep into my eyes. There was an ominous silence. "All right then, I will give you my trust" he declared.

He more than kept his word. Over the next two years he gave me over 27 hours of one-on-one interviews and facilitated my access to a rich panoply of over 100 sources, from childhood friends, to close associates, to critics, to opponents and to family members. No attempt was made to censor what I wrote. I may not have captured every angle of the Nazarbayev story but I saw more than enough of it to be able to complete a thorough 250 page portrait of my subject which was well received by most international reviewers.

Early in my biographer's journey I realised that Nazarbayev possessed that rare and undefinable quality known as statesmanship. For running through his character and track record I could identify four gold seams which deserve to be highlighted – personality, patriotism, political skill and the exercise of power with a clear purpose.

Nursultan Nazarbayev is an immensely attractive personality. He has a natural charisma, a good sense of humour, an intuitive ability to read people, an abundance of charm, and a steely determination to lead a discussion towards

Nursultan Nazarbayev gifts the Golden Man to the United Nations. Received by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, New York, 24th June 1997.

President Nazarbayev with UK Prime Minister David Cameron during his state visit to Kazakhstan, July 2013.

the outcome he wants. When backed up by his impressive ability to work hard, to put in long hours, and to immerse himself in detail, these gifts gave Nazarbayev formidable array of political skills which he has used to the full in the various and vastly different chapters of his career.

In a revealing moment of his interviews for my biography, talking about his earliest years as a young steelworker, Nazarbayev declared: "I was an ambitious young man and party membership was the route to advancement. If I had thought it would have helped my ambition in those days to become a Buddhist, I would have become a Buddhist. But as it was, I became a member of the Communist Party – and a good one".

This ideological flexibility was a great asset as Nazarbayev climbed his way up the CP ladder of power from local branches of Komsomol all the way to the Politburo of the Soviet Union. If his ascent is analysed in terms of his relationship with individuals in the Communist hierarchy, Nazarbayev showed the adaptability of a political chameleon. For he initially charmed and

gradually outmanoeuvred various CP apparatchiks including prominent figures such as Mikhail Suslov, Dinmukhammed Kunayev, A.P Kirilenko, Konstantin Chernenko, Gennady Kolbin, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

As his power struggles within the Soviet leadership structure grew more intense, Nazarbayev's strength was that his patriotism was far more important than his Communism. There were two important historical episodes in which Nazarbayev demonstrated that he was at heart a Kazakh nationalist, rather than a Kremlin loyalist.

In December 1986 when student demonstrations known as *Jeltoqsan* erupted on the streets of Almaty, Nazarbayev, although officially side-lined by Moscow as the No 2 man in the government of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, cleverly managed to distance himself from the brutal suppression of the youthful protesters. This was blamed on the Kremlin's newly appointed No. 1 man Gennady Kolbin. For it was he, backed by Moscow's elite *Spetsnaz* Special Forces, who took the responsibility for crushing the somewhat amateur *Jeltoqsan* demonstrators.

Kolbin's continuing mistakes accelerated the twilight of Soviet authority in Kazakhstan. He was effectively fired by Gorbachev, whose Politburo in April 1990 duly elected Nazarbayev to be the Communist Party boss and effectively the Leader of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan.

If the Moscow high command thought they were appointing a compliant leader who would govern the Republic in accordance with the wishes of the Soviet Union, they soon discovered they had made a big mistake. For Nazarbayev audaciously defied the military and political might of the Soviet Union by issuing his own Presidential decree in August 1991, forbidding further nuclear tests of any sort to be held on the territory of Kazakhstan. This test ban was widely popular with the Kazakh people and deeply offensive to the Soviet military. But, as the Soviet Union was falling apart in the autumn of 1991, the weakened bosses in Moscow had no option but to capitulate to Nazarbayev's pre-emptive strike.

Although Nazarbayev remained supportive, in principle, of Kazakhstan's membership of the Soviet Union, this was an untenable position when the Union itself was imploding.

In the chaos of the break-up, Nazarbayev exerted all his diplomatic skills, in order to avert a Slav versus Muslim confrontation from erupting in the

space vacated by Soviet authority. Thanks in no small part to the emollient personality of the Kazakh leader, the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which replaced the Soviet Union in December 1991 was peacefully born in Almaty, the then Kazakh capital city, with less bitterness and bloodshed than might otherwise have been the case.

Nazarbayev's role in preventing the break-up of the Soviet Union from being a greater catastrophe than it was has been underestimated by most historians. But it was estimated correctly, indeed generously, by the saga's greatest loser, Mikhail Gorbachev, who in an interview for my biography in 2009 said: "*We had our differences, but I honour Nazarbayev as the one leader who was consistently right on the big issues. He was one of the first to see that the reform of the Soviet Union was a necessity, and he was one of the last to keep fighting to prevent its complete collapse, because he knew that would be a disaster. He was absolutely correct on both counts. We are still struggling with the after-effects of that disaster. But I can also say of Nazarbayev that he handled the disaster better than any of the other newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union.*"

However politically skilful President Nazarbayev had been when leading Kazakhstan while it was a part of the Soviet Union, he soon needed far greater skills to govern his country during the traumatic early years of its independence.

The traumas included an epidemic of hyperinflation; the government's inability to pay wages and pensions; the exodus of over a million ethnic Russians; widespread food shortages; massive discontent and demonstrations at home; accompanied by menacing threats from abroad about the legality of Kazakhstan's international borders.

Finding a way through these interlocking problems looked almost impossible. Many observers thought that the country would collapse. But Nazarbayev's greatest asset was that he knew his people and was good at communicating with them. Kazakhs, throughout their history, have shown deep reserves of personal stoicism and the endurance of suffering. So in the post-independence years, which were euphemistically described as "a period of transition", Nazarbayev became a superbly empathetic grass roots communicator with his suffering people.

He travelled around his huge country on a non-stop reassurance mission explaining to miners why they were not receiving their wages; to pensioners


President Nazarbayev with UK Prime Minister David Cameron in Downing Street, 3rd November 2015.

President Nazarbayez with Queen Elizabeth II during his State Visit to the UK, 4th November 2015.

why they could not be paid their pensions; to shoppers why the shelves were empty; and to demonstrators how their grievances would one day be remedied. Amazingly the Kazakh people accepted what their President told them. They believed in his patriotic good intentions and put up with the birth pains of independence. Thus the new nation survived intact.

Russia, itself in chaos, was the giant neighbour from hell. Its economic policies such as devaluation, the lifting of all price controls and the refusal to release Kazakhstan's own roubles on deposit in the Central Bank of Moscow caused near disaster for the new government in Almaty. But President Nazarbayev proved to be a past master of personal diplomacy when it came to winning the cooperation of President Yeltsin. So gradually there was an improvement in Kazakh-Russia relations not only on the short-term problems of economic survival but also on long-term strategic issues such as a fair deal for Kazakhstan on the oil riches of the Caspian Sea.

Although in the immediate years after independence, China was an easier neighbour to Kazakhstan than Russia, Nazarbayev still needed every ounce of his diplomatic skills to negotiate with Beijing. For there were no agreed borders along the 1700-mile China-Kazakhstan frontier and many connected problems such as water rights and the emigration rights for the million plus Kazakhs living in China's Xinjiang province.

Beijing had never before agreed a frontier with any of the Soviet Republics on its borders. The long-standing Sino-Kazakh demarcation disputes were exceptionally difficult. Some Mandarin maps showed large regions of Kazakhstan, including Lake Balkhash, as Chinese territory. Such claims and counter-claims initially looked insolvable. But against all the odds, the personal chemistry between the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin and President Nursultan Nazarbayev overcame all the obstacles. The two leaders struck up such a warm rapport that they swept all the ancient arguments about borders into the dustbin of irrelevant history.

Instead, Jiang Zemin and Nazarbayev ratified a deal which gave 53 per cent of the disputed areas to Kazakhstan and 47 per cent to China. This meant that after centuries of wars, invasions, skirmishes and border clashes there was now a peaceful territorial settlement between the two countries. This was a major historical achievement for which Nazarbayev deserves the lion's share of the credit.

Having achieved a state of peaceful co-existence between Kazakhstan and its two giant neighbours Russia and China, President Nazarbayev could pay more attention to establishing Kazakhstan's place in the world in the eyes of the wider international community.

From the first days of independence onwards priority was given to creating an elite body of talented diplomats, negotiators and ambassadors who became the founders of the country's new Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two outstanding foreign policy achievements on the global stage by Nazarbayev were the international acclaim he won for his denuclearisation policy and his Presidency of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

How Nazarbayev manoeuvred his way to the Presidency of OSCE and how he turned the 2010 Astana Summit of this little-known international organisation into a highly successful political *coup de théâtre* for his country is one of the legendary tales of 21st century diplomacy. All that needs to be said here was that it marked Nazarbayev's ascent into the big league of national leaders who understood both the show business and the real business of global summitry.

The turnout of leaders from the OSCE's 56 member states was impressive. They included the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and another 40 or so Presidents, Prime Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers from around the world.

What this stellar galaxy of international leadership actually achieved in Astana is open to argument. What seemed unarguable was the impressive impact that the presence of these world leaders made to the domestic population of Kazakhstan. They rubbed their eyes in astonishment at the realisation that their capital was playing host to a summit of leaders who personified the 21st century elite of international power. It was the moment when the Kazakhs themselves woke up and realised that Kazakhstan was an important country!

One of Nazarbayev's great strengths is that he consistently managed to win acceptance for his leadership both domestically and globally. This has not been plain sailing. There are international idealists who make fair criticisms of Kazakhstan for its imperfect record on human rights and for its inadequate

progress towards the democratic ideal of free and fair elections. Yet international realists are simultaneously grateful for the peaceful stability and solid record of economic growth which Nazarbayev has delivered. Kazakhstan stands out as the only former Soviet Republic which has managed to achieve such results and to look like a thriving national state which will endure and flourish far into the 22nd Century.

To a perceptive visitor to Kazakhstan, it feels like a nation at peace with itself, with its neighbours, and with the prevailing culture and zeitgeist of the contemporary world. Although Kazakhs just about make up the majority of the country's 19 million population this is a multi-ethnic society in which careers are open to talent and where opportunities abound.

The best place to absorb this atmosphere of hope and progress is in the nation's capital, recently renamed Nur-Sultan. Created to be a city of government like Washington DC, Brasília, Ottawa or Canberra, it reflects both the soul and the vision of the Nation's Founding Father. Nur-Sultan's young multi-ethnic population, now exceeding one million; its exotic international architecture; its joint emphasis on present political governance and future educational hope; plus its proven ability to deliver a peaceful transition from President Nazarbayev to President Tokayev all adds up to the jewel in the crown of a successful nation.

Who found the jewels and polished them? Who built them into a crown? Who made the crown accepted around the world and respected by its citizens at home? Who, in the idiom of Sophocles, has made the days of Kazakhstan so glorious? The answer to all these questions is Nursultan Nazarbayev. This is why, on the 30th Anniversary of the birth of the Republic, he deserves the accolade of "The Founding President" or "The Founding Father" of his country.

*Jonathan Aitken is a former United Kingdom Minister of State for Defence.*

Kazakhstan's Houses of Parliament in Nur-Sultan.

Chapter 5

# Kazakhstan's political reforms

ERLAN KARIN

Kazakhstan entered the third decade of the 21st century as a dynamic nation that rests on a harmonious combination of its historic experience and future horizons. Over the 30 years of our independence, we have achieved some remarkable successes in politics, economy, social and cultural-humanitarian development, as well as in foreign policy. The gist of Kazakhstan's overall success story is not challenged even by our harshest critics.

However, we should avoid describing Kazakhstan's way as a perfectly upward trajectory leading inalterably to the heights of progress. The history of Kazakhstan's sovereignty is full of major challenges that had to be dealt with, especially in the early days of our independence. At the time, we had to set up the country, support the social system, create new governance and public institutions, build a market-oriented economy, establish international partnerships, determine our borders.

In other words, Kazakhstan was facing the over-arching challenge of a full-scale comprehensive modernisation of the nation. Operating to an extremely tight timeline, we had to adopt unique approaches, make strategically calibrated decisions, use political practices that would support the evolutionary transformation of Kazakhstan's society into a distinctively new phenomenon. Political reforms played a crucial role in this multifaceted transition process.

By the way, the issue of political transformation in post-Soviet republics has long been and remains a popular discussion topic in the academic and expert community. And it covers a much wider region than just Kazakhstan or, for instance, Russia. The issue is actively explored internationally, its various aspects are covered by numerous research articles and academic papers. If there is a general conclusion one can draw from all these materials, it is that both classical and adapted models may work efficiently in one place, remain semi-efficient in

another, and totally fail in the third one. Fortunately or unfortunately, such is the logic of the process of history – local specifics and context are extremely important.

Therefore, in an attempt to implement its own unique model of transition, Kazakhstan critically analysed and carefully adopted the modernisation experience of the world's most advanced nations, combining best practices from East and West. Not coincidentally, many observers and experts noted that Kazakhstan's system of government bears resemblances to the constitutional order of France as well as the political systems of Singapore and Malaysia.

At the same time, speaking about the reforms and main priorities of the country's overall development, Kazakhstan's First President Nursultan Nazarbayev once said: "We are following our own, Kazakh way of development. We have once chosen that path and we have been following it ever since. Having explored and analysed international practices we chose an evolutionary way. We are against the idea of enforcing democracy, especially if it is enforced from the outside. We are not trying to copy anyone and remain guided only by the interests of our country and our people."

Nazarbayev's renowned formula of "economy first, politics after" is based on that same logic; it recognises the simple fact that a sustainable democratic transition is not attainable without fundamental economic reform and a growth in public prosperity.

It was that balanced approach, with due account of Kazakhstan's unique situation and the country's long-term interests, which laid the foundation for Kazakhstan's political development in the new era of its history.

## Formation of a super-presidential system

The Soviet realities of the late eighties – early nineties of the 20th century clearly testified to the fact that such a geopolitical unit as the USSR, which seemed to be unshakeable, was gradually diminishing. According to Salyk Zimanov, a prominent Kazakh constitutional lawyer, "the collapse of the Union could have been delayed, but not prevented." Therefore, the complex stagnation and subsequent disappearance of the USSR from the world map set the priority task for the 15 newly independent states to form an effective system of public administration and political institutions.

In Kazakhstan, the starting point in this process was the decision to establish the institution of the president, adopted in April 1990, which was when Kazakhstan was still part of the USSR. At the same time, the monopoly of the communist party on state power was removed at the legislative level.

It should be noted that similar processes took place in all Soviet republics, with different intensity and dynamics. However, it is noteworthy that after the Baltic countries, Kazakhstan was the first to take such dramatic steps. After that, from May to December 1990, one after another, 11 of the 15 Soviet republics declared their sovereignty (the Baltic countries and the Azerbaijan SSR made similar decisions throughout 1988-1989). That is how the "parade of sovereignties", which in fact ended the USSR, was completed.

However, the introduction of the institution of the presidency did not mean the immediate establishment of a presidential form of government in Kazakhstan. At the time, ultimate power was still concentrated in the Supreme Soviet, which was the pinnacle of the vertically-built system of councils of people's deputies.

In terms of its external attributes, the existing model resembled a classical presidential-parliamentary republic, but in its content, it was deformed significantly.

On the one hand, we saw a new and progressive institution of the presidency, and on the other, a conservative Supreme Soviet that had not freed itself from Soviet political traditions.

This kind of dualism of state power did not help in the implementation of rapid and radical transformations in the country, and even led to two serious parliamentary crises. The first Constitution of independent Kazakhstan, adopted in January 1993, only confirmed the state of affairs, becoming, in essence, a kind of political compromise of that period. For a better understanding of the historical context, we consider it important to cite one excerpt from the book of the First President of Kazakhstan "*The Era of Independence*". Nursultan Nazarbayev describes the realities of those years as follows: "… On 28 January 1993, the Supreme Soviet voted for the Constitution. I perfectly understood all its imperfections. Almost immediately it was discovered that it was completely divorced from reality and could not serve as a legal basis for state building. The Supreme Soviet, which voted for this Constitution, once again demonstrated

a fatal discord with the new era. At a turning point for the country, it did not contribute to the reforms, and openly hindered them."

It soon became obvious that further developments in such a destructive vein were a dead end for the country. In addition, negative trends on the political scene in Kazakhstan were accompanied by a rather chaotic and explosive external situation. The circumstances in individual states of the former Soviet Union, which were largely the result of internal disagreements, interethnic conflicts, and various political confrontations, also spoke in favour of the need to consolidate state power.

As a result, over time, Kazakhstan's society and political circles came to acknowledge that in order successfully to overcome a profound socio-economic crisis, ensure political stability, strengthen the unity of the people and, eventually, create a strong foundation for Kazakhstan's statehood, the entire executive vertical line of power, headed by the President, needs to be active and operational.

Only a new constitution could provide the legislative basis for this, and it was adopted in a popular referendum on 30 August 1995. The adoption of the new constitution effectively completed the complex process of deconstructing the country's Soviet governmental bodies, and Kazakhstan became a super-presidential republic. This form of government was indispensable during the first stages of the formation of statehood. Time has shown that the maximum centralisation and concentration of state power, which the president personified, played a key role in carrying out rapid and radical transformations in the country. Suffice it to say that in the period from March to December 1995, the President signed 147 most important decrees that had the force of law, while the former Supreme Council managed to adopt only seven laws in a whole year.

Moving forward, the institution of the presidency became the pivotal element of the political system, providing a reliable foundation for the implementation of consistent reforms and evolutionary state building.

Government buildings in Nur-Sultan.

## Constitutional reforms and a phased redistribution of powers

In the long term, there has never been a question in Kazakhstan about what kind of state model to build. The answer here, in principle, is unambiguous: the structure had to be unitary, and the form of government presidential, with competent representative government agencies. The transformation of a strong presidential republic, decentralisation and deconcentration of power, building a new mechanism of checks and balances was therefore a matter of time.

The first real outlines of this strategic vector appeared after the 2007 constitutional reform. By that time, it had become absolutely clear that the rigid hierarchy of the presidential power had kept the country from inevitable shocks that could have damaged the political autonomy and economic independence of the country. With the passing of this critical phase when new institutions were forming, the nation entered the trajectory of progressive development, and the level and quality of life of citizens grew steadily.

In fact, the President, who at the time was the main political actor with executive powers, performed the function of a sort of super-efficient crisis manager in the 1990s who had to tackle the task of bringing the country out of political collapse and socio-economic chaos. It was quite natural therefore that as the situation changed for the better, President Nursultan Nazarbayev would put forward a number of constitutional initiatives that entailed redistribution of power and allowed him to move away from a manual control mode in many areas of politics.

At the same time, the 2007 constitutional reform in many ways became a vivid reflection of a constructive political dialogue that took place in the country in 2005-2006. It absorbed the proposals of a wide range of social and political forces. In particular, Parliament's role has grown, and the number of its members have increased. A simplified procedure was brought in to allow a vote of no confidence by the Mazhilis [lower house of the Parliament], both in the government as a whole and in each minister separately. Parliament was empowered to form two-thirds of the Constitutional Council, the Central Election Commission, and the Accounts Committee. The appointment of a prime minister by the president was now only possible with the consent of the majority of the members of the lower house.

The development of local government received a new impetus. The term of office of members of local representative bodies – *maslikhats* – increased to five

years. As with the Parliament, it became easier for them to express a vote of no confidence in *akims* [mayors].

A unique case in the world parliamentary practice is the constitutional consolidation of the status of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and ensuring its representation in the Mazhilis.

A special emphasis was placed on strengthening the rights of citizens, which, for example, was expressed through creating the institution of an ombudsman in Kazakhstan.

It is difficult to say whether it was simply a coincidence or not, but chronologically, the constitutional reform virtually coincided with the multilateral agreement on Kazakhstan's chairmanship of the OSCE, which was announced in November 2007. Undoubtedly, this fact can be regarded as a significant foreign policy victory for Kazakhstan, and successful internal political transformations played a key role here. The 2007 constitutional reform is therefore a significant milestone in the common aspiration of Kazakh society and the state to strengthen the democratic foundations of the country in the long term.

The next big step in this direction was taken through the 2017 constitutional reform. It was preceded by a broad public and expert discussion. According to official data, about two million people took part in the discussions around the constitutional amendments, and 6,000 proposals affecting two-thirds of the articles of the Constitution were brought forward.

According to most experts, and lawyers and political scientists in particular, the reform marked the beginning of a deeper stage of political modernisation. The role of the Parliament in the formation of the Government was strengthened even further. And the Government, in turn, became more independent, particularly after it was delegated the powers to manage the economy. Law enforcement and the judicial system received a modern constitutional basis.

It is also noteworthy that in the updated version of the Constitution a provision according to which Parliament exercises "legislative power" was spelled out for the first time. Furthermore, the power of issuing laws and decrees that have the force of law was excluded from the competence of the President, and his right to cancel and suspend acts of the Government and the Prime Minister was abolished.

In general, consistent constitutional innovations have formed a stable system of interaction between all branches of government, which operates based on progressive democratic principles and standards. These inovations contributed to the strengthening of the political system of the state, opened up new opportunities for party-building, and became the foundation and a kind of prologue for new changes, which Kazakhstan has always taken seriously.

### President Tokayev: continuity of the course and liberalisation of the political system

On 19 March 2019 a completely predictable event happened in the modern history of Kazakhstan, which at the same time, took almost everyone by surprise. The President of the country and the Leader of the Nation voluntarily resigned from his post. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, his successor as head of state, very succinctly described this unprecedented step in global practice as

another political innovation from Nursultan Nazarbayev. One cannot deny the extraordinary merits of Elbasy [Leader of the Nation] in the formation and strengthening of Kazakh statehood. I am certain that they will not only be inscribed in golden letters in the chronicles of Kazakh history but will also become a vivid reflection of his talent as a reformer, his strategic vision, and unique personal features on a global scale.

In his now historic speech, he stressed that he was leaving to make way for a new generation of politicians who will come with new ideas and new approaches. Immediately after coming to power in a constitutional way, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev made a fundamental decision not to sit out until the end of his predecessor's term. Instead, he decided to go to the polls, and, if successful, to receive a direct mandate of citizens' trust, which would give him the necessary *carte blanche* to further implement large-scale social, economic and political reforms demanded by the country at a new stage of development.

Swearing in of President Tokayev, 12th June 2019.

The key contours of the new President's political platform were formulated in his election campaign. The "Continuity, Justice, Progress" triad fully reflected the political approaches and views of the new head of state on the country's further development.

It was then seamlessly supplemented with the "strong President – influential Parliament – accountable Government" formula. According to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, "it is this political system that most fully meets the needs of our state in complex geopolitical realities and contributes to the completion of our strategic tasks. The political superstructure must correspond to deep economic transformations; otherwise, retardation of reforms may occur. The world experience convincingly testifies to this."

That is how the new President's course towards comprehensive transformations, where consistent political modernisation occupies one of the central places, gained its conceptual foundations. Subsequently, he gradually and systematically built up this political platform. Important provisions and directions of political reforms are contained in his three state-of-the-nation addresses, programme articles, and other speeches. Their core messages are the ideas of building an effective state and a just society based on a broad civil dialogue and pluralism of opinions, and the state's responsibility before the people. These were the ideas behind Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's original concept of a "listening state", which implies broad involvement of citizens in the political process, establishing effective dialogue between the authorities and the society, and tackling urgent issues of the country's development.

At the same time, responding to people's demands for change, the President repeatedly expressed the idea that democracy should primarily serve development and building, not disunity and destruction, and that there can be no place for haste and populism in the process of implementing reforms. As a politician with an outstanding international background and a thorough analyst, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev perfectly understands the nature and dynamics of modern world development and clearly recognises current social trends.

It is a crucial feature given that destructive processes of social and political fragmentation are becoming increasingly evident in the world, the institution of the state itself is undergoing significant erosion, and modern technologies have an ambiguous impact on the society, while the coronavirus pandemic

has become the "black swan" for all humankind. In these circumstances, it is necessary like never before to maintain political and social stability, while giving impetus to further socio-economic development. This constitutes the current task of all responsible states and leaders.

This logic, and the need to continue reforms with account taken of modern challenges, led to the President adopting the strategy of the so-called "systemic and complex reforms", which pointwise contributed to a change in the situation for the better. This approach is absolutely justified, since the country has already formed a solid institutional structure of interaction between the branches of the government, while the long-term course towards democratisation and liberalisation of the political system and expanding the participation of citizens in public administration has been determined and is underway.

In this context, one should note the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT) that was created upon the initiative of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. In a short period of time, the institution has transformed into an engine generating and promoting changes that are important for the state and the society. Most of the President's political initiatives were communicated through this dialogue platform. I am speaking in particular about the first package of political reforms that was unveiled at the NCPT meeting on 20 December 2019. All those novelties have already been implemented. The threshold for registering new political parties has been halved. There is now a 30 percent quota for women and youth on electoral party lists. These norms have clearly shown their effectiveness through the results of the election to the *Mazhilis* and *maslikhats* that took place in January 2021.

The reforms also introduced the institution of parliamentary opposition, initiated the decriminalisation of Article 130 and the humanisation of Article 174 of the Criminal Code, as well as adopted a fundamentally new law on rallies. Kazakhstan also joined the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which abolished the death penalty in the country.

The second package of political reforms was brought forward by the head of state on 1 September 2020 in his state-of-the-nation address. In his address, the President announced the transition to direct elections of rural *akims* starting from 2021. Instructions were given out to draw up the Concept for the

Development of Local Government and the Law on Public Scrutiny, as well as to create a single institution for online petitions. In this reform package Kassym-Jomart Tokayev put special focus on the human rights dimension, emphasising the need to improve legislation on combating torture and human trafficking, as well as protecting citizens (especially children) from cyberbullying.

The President's new initiatives contained in the third package of reforms are also crucial in terms of further institutional development of Kazakhstan's political system and improving the human rights protection system. For instance, the President proposed to reduce the threshold for political parties to enter the *Mazhilis* from 7 to 5 percent. This novelty will enhance political competition and many parties will increase their chances of getting into Parliament. The reform will also help accommodate the views of the broadest layers of the population in the process of developing public policy. The introduction of the "against all" option in the elections at all levels will provide voters with a legitimate tool for expressing an alternative position.

It is worth noting individually that Kassym-Jomart Tokayev made an important decision to hold elections of rural and village *akims* in 2021. He also outlined the prospect of electing district *akims* for the first time and subsequently approved the dates of the elections in 2024.

In September 2021, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev put forward the fourth package of political reforms. All of this testifies to the fact that all the President's political reforms constitute a serious and extensive package of targeted changes that will become a significant step in strengthening the human rights protection system, expanding civil participation, developing parliamentarism, multiparty system, and local government, as well as make a considerable contribution to the further overall process of democratisation.

That being said, political modernisation remains one of the key items on the state's long-term agenda. The current President attaches the highest priority to this issue. That is why the elaboration of subsequent reforms continues. Noteworthy in this regard is the President's programme article titled "Independence above All" published at the very beginning of a milestone and anniversary year for the country – the year of the 30th anniversary of Independence.

The President defines Independence and statehood as the basic values that consolidate all Kazakh citizens and once again conveys the message of the

irreversibility of political modernisation. It is a particularly serious message that becomes event more important in the context of modern dynamic processes in the country and around the world. At the new historical stage of Kazakhstan's statehood, the President's article serves as a powerful ideological basis that forms the contours of future development.

* * *

It is not easy to provide a detailed analysis of such a vast topic in the format of a short essay. We therefore have only outlined the general logic and the course of political reforms that have been taking place in Kazakhstan over the 30 years of Independence. Many important aspects were deliberately omitted. However, big things can be seen from a distance. The 30th anniversary of Independence is a milestone date in the history of modern Kazakhstan, and provides an excellent opportunity for meaningful reflection on the country's path. It was not an easy path for our country, but we completed it with dignity and made significant progress in all areas, especially in the consistent reform of the political sphere. There are even more ambitious tasks ahead, and we will tackle them based on nationwide consensus and with account of the long-term interests of our country.

I am thankful for the opportunity to participate in such a significant project. Without doubt, this book will become a significant event in Kazakhstan's intellectual life and will find its thoughtful readers.

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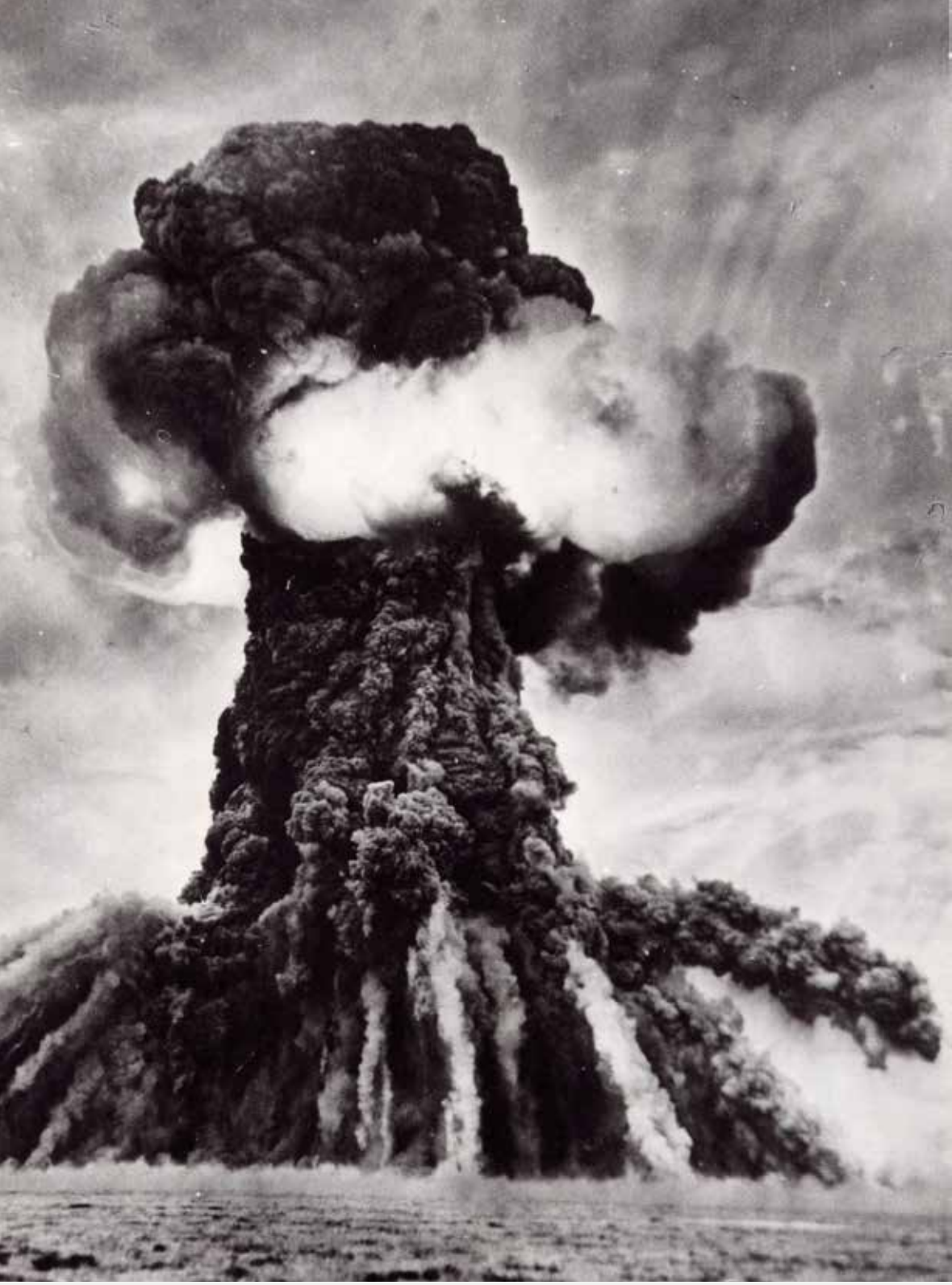

Soviet nuclear explosion at Semipalatinsk test site.

Chapter 6

# Kazakhstan and global nuclear politics

Dr TOGZHAN KASSENOVA[1]

Kazakhstan's nuclear story started in 1947 when Stalin and his Soviet government chose to build a nuclear testing site in the Kazakh steppe near Semipalatinsk. Kazakhstan was pulled even further into the Soviet nuclear weapons enterprise when the Soviet military-industrial complex built additional military testing sites and facilities to produce nuclear material on its land. The Soviet military also installed intercontinental ballistic missiles and heavy bombers that could carry nuclear bombs to their targets.

Moscow's decision to make Kazakhstan part of its weapons complex, in which the people of Kazakhstan had no say, had a profound effect on Kazakhstan's national identity. The Soviet nuclear tests in Kazakhstan left a dark and tragic legacy of deaths and illnesses, with the result that the population's distrust for all things nuclear continues to this day.

In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s the Kazakh leadership faced tough decisions on what to do with the nuclear weapons and radioactive materials. And that decision-making process itself helped the young country clarify its own views on the subject and come to the decision to strive for a world free of nuclear weapons and to support the norms of nuclear non-proliferation.

The Soviet nuclear legacy brought Kazakhstan benefits too. The nuclear infrastructure provided a foundation for a peaceful nuclear programme that Kazakhstan is eager to advance. After removing the nuclear weapons and eliminating their infrastructure, Kazakhstan used the remaining scientific and production base to promote commercial nuclear fuel production, nuclear science, and peaceful applications of nuclear technology.

## Nuclear Past

In the 1940s the Soviet government rushed to break US monopoly as the sole nuclear power. In the early morning of 29th August 1949, the Soviet military tested its first atomic bomb at the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site in Eastern Kazakhstan. Forty years of nuclear tests followed.

The nuclear tests left a devastating impact on both the environment and local people, especially during the first years of atmospheric tests when they were conducted in a regulatory vacuum – there were no detailed rules on how to minimise radioactive fallout and protect the environment.

In 1963, nuclear powers – the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom – agreed to ban nuclear tests in the atmosphere, space, and under water. Nuclear tests in Kazakhstan continued, but moved underground. While underground tests were not as harmful as those conducted in the atmosphere, they were not harmless either. Soil and underground water absorbed radioactive particles. Radioactive gas, a by-product of nuclear tests, sometimes escaped to the surface via cracks in the earth.

Lake Shagan, created by a Soviet nuclear test in the Semipalatinsk test area, and still contaminated.

By the late 1980s, a fortunate combination of events both within and outside the Soviet Union resulted in a halt to all nuclear tests in Kazakhstan. Internationally, the negative impact of nuclear tests on people and the environment could not be ignored, neither by the nuclear powers themselves, nor by the world population. In the Soviet Union, the arrival of the younger and more reform-oriented leader Mikhail Gorbachev was fortuitous for two main reasons. First, Gorbachev was keen to slow down the nuclear arms race, and on a personal level, was sympathetic to the idea of banning nuclear tests. Second, as part of his policy of political openness and reform (*Glasnost* and *Perestroika*), his government ended the political monopoly of the Communist Party. Other political parties and movements were allowed to form, including those focused on the environment.

On the ground in Kazakhstan, as in other Soviet republics, the people and local government organisations became increasingly vocal against rule from Moscow that failed to take into account their interests and preferences. The continuing Soviet nuclear tests were one of the most controversial manifestations of this disrespect for public opinion. In 1989, sparked by the news that yet another

underground nuclear test had resulted in serious radioactive contamination, a massive public anti-nuclear movement galvanised in Kazakhstan.

The movement, led by the famous Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov, grew to millions in a matter of few days. It was called *Nevada-Semipalatinsk* to reflect the transnational nature of Kazakh people's fight against nuclear tests, and demanded that all nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk were stopped immediately.

Over the following two years a difficult and complicated multi-level struggle on the fate of the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site ensued between Kazakhstan and Moscow. While Gorbachev and some Soviet scientists believed nuclear testing was no longer necessary, the Soviet military establishment pushed hard for them to continue, even if just for a few more years. *Nevada-Semipalatinsk* led enormous protests and marches against nuclear tests. Peace activists from the across the world, including the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan and Russia, came to Kazakhstan to participate in protest actions.

Finally, on 29th August 1991, 42 years to the day from the first Soviet nuclear test, Kazakhstan, by the power of a decree signed by the Kazakh president


Anti-nuclear protesters in Semipalatinsk.

Members of the *Nevada-Semipalatinsk* anti-nuclear movement.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, shut down the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site and banned all nuclear tests on its territory.

The Semipalatinsk testing site was not the only nuclear legacy that Kazakhstan had to grapple with. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, Kazakhstan faced decisions on a nuclear inheritance it had not sought. There were more than a thousand nuclear warheads, more than a hundred intercontinental ballistic missiles and 40 heavy bombers that could carry nuclear bombs, on the territory of the newly independent state. In addition, tonnes of nuclear material, facilities that could produce nuclear fuel, and other infrastructure built in support of the Soviet nuclear weapons programme, was now Kazakhstan's to reckon with.

This terrible nuclear inheritance worried both the international community and the Kazakh leadership. For the international community, the questions revolved around: Will Kazakhstan try to push its way into a nuclear club? Will it be able to ensure safety and security of nuclear facilities and material, making sure third countries or groups don't receive unauthorised access? What will happen to scientists and technical experts who worked at nuclear facilities and

possessed sensitive knowledge, but were now facing unemployment? Fears and concerns in the international community were understandable. Never before had the international system experienced a breakup of a nuclear superpower.[2]

But it was even harder for Kazakhstan. A young state, going through a severe economic and political crisis, had to find a solution to an extremely difficult nuclear problem. The most critical question facing the Kazakh leadership revolved around the following: which course of action would help Kazakhstan strengthen its sovereignty? Fortunately, for both Kazakhstan and international security, the goals of Kazakhstan and the international community aligned.

Kazakhstan's independence was fragile, and the question of survival as an independent state was far from theoretical. Nestled between two nuclear powers – Russia and China – and situated not far from the nuclear region of South Asia, surrounded by weak Central Asian neighbours, Kazakhstan's geopolitical situation was unenviable. Nationalist political figures in Russia claimed that parts of Kazakhstan's northern areas with predominantly ethnic Russian populations belonged to Russia. Some maps in Chinese textbooks identified parts of Kazakhstan as Chinese. Those security vulnerabilities explain why receiving security assurances from nuclear powers – the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom – was the number one priority for Kazakhstan's leadership. Fortunately, the nuclear powers were able to offer such assurances to Kazakhstan.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's economy collapsed. Attracting foreign direct investment was an immediate priority. As one example, Kazakhstan's largest oil field at Tengiz needed investment and technology from major oil companies to develop its oil fields and provide much-needed cash. By 1993, US oil giant Chevron and the government of Kazakhstan had signed a cooperation agreement. Chevron received access to new oil reserves, and Kazakhstan acquired its first major foreign investment that opened the way for American and international business in Kazakhstan.

As a new country on the international scene, Kazakhstan was eager to join the international community as soon as possible. The governments of the United States and other countries provided explicit support for Kazakhstan's membership of the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other key institutions.

On the more practical level, the leadership of Kazakhstan was concerned about the financial resources and technical expertise required to dismantle and remove nuclear weapons from its territory. International assistance, the bulk of which came from the US-funded Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program that authorised assistance to the former Soviet Union to reduce nuclear risks, helped alleviate this concern.

Within Kazakhstan, the domestic political situation was also supportive of choosing a non-nuclear path. The tragic legacy of the Soviet nuclear tests meant that Kazakhs supported their government's plans to get rid of nuclear weapons. There were no powerful interest groups who supported keeping nuclear weapons or building an indigenous military nuclear programme. While there were voices, especially among the nationalist groups, in support of keeping nuclear capability, they were fragmented and did not carry political weight.

While less tangible and hard to measure, one of the important drivers for Kazakhstan's nuclear-free choice was a desire to adhere to international norms. Kazakhstan wanted to enter the international community on good terms, as a responsible member. It was not interested in pushing its way into a nuclear club and thus raising international security tensions.

By December of 1993, Kazakhstan's parliament voted "Yes" for Kazakhstan to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as a non-nuclear-weapon state. With this step, Kazakhstan legally committed itself to never seek nuclear weapons.

## Becoming Nuclear-Free

Once Kazakhstan's leadership took the strategic decision to denuclearise, it was time to put this commitment into practice. By 1995 all nuclear weapons had been removed from Kazakhstan to Russia. Over the next few years, together with partners from the United States, Russia, and other countries, Kazakhstan worked on decommissioning nuclear weapons-related infrastructure, removing and securing nuclear material, converting its nuclear research reactors to work on low-enriched uranium instead of highly enriched uranium (highly enriched uranium is a higher security risk as it can be used in a weapon).

One of the most impressive examples of securing nuclear material saw Kazakhstan and the United States carry out a high-stakes secret operation to


First President Nazarbayev at the Nuclear Security Summit, Washington, April 2010.


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airlift roughly 600 kilograms of highly enriched uranium (HEU) out of one of the nuclear facilities in Kazakhstan and ship it to the United States.[3] Left at the Ulba Metallurgical Plant from the times of the Soviet nuclear programme, this could have been used to build at least 20 nuclear weapons and Kazakhstan's leaders wanted to make sure that it didn't fall into the wrong hands.

It was an unprecedent project. In the United States, no blueprint or dedicated finance existed to carry it out, and several US government agencies had to come together to make funding and technical expertise available. On the ground in Kazakhstan, the multi-week operation involved sorting, organising and packing dangerous material, driving containers packed with HEU in treacherous conditions (transporting had to be done under the disguise of night, in wintery black ice conditions) and flying it nonstop across the world. The two countries worked in tandem. Project participants found ways to overcome all the technical and logistical challenges they faced, thanks to trust, creativity and flexibility displayed by both countries.

Another notable endeavour of much longer duration revolved around the former nuclear testing site at Semipalatinsk. The work began almost three decades ago, in the early 1990s, when Kazakhstan received full custody of the former nuclear testing site. There were multiple challenges: the former nuclear testing site

Cleaning up the Semipalatinsk test site.

held public safety, environmental, and security risks. Tunnels and boreholes, as well as some parts of the huge site that sprawled over 18,500 square kilometers, were contaminated with nuclear and radioactive material. People and animals in the vicinity faced the threat of exposure to radiation. As for security risks, nuclear material from tests and experiments left in those abandoned installations could be used for a nuclear device. In some places the soil was contaminated with enough radiological material to create a "dirty bomb".

Gradually, thanks to the efforts of the governments, but especially scientists and technical experts, from Kazakhstan, the United States and Russia, all tunnels and boreholes were sealed and more than 100 kilograms of vulnerable nuclear material was secured.[4]

In true swords-to-ploughshares fashion, Kazakhstan now offers the former nuclear testing site for training and exercises in support of the international treaty banning nuclear tests – the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). When this treaty enters into force, it is important that the international community has the technical means and expertise to verify whether a nuclear explosion has taken place. Towards this end, the organisation supporting the treaty's eventual enforcement – the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) – must conduct training and exercises. One of several exercises that Kazakhstan hosted was the largest ever on-site inspection simulation exercise. There are few places in the world that could have provided more realistic conditions than the former nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk. The exercise scenario called for an investigation into a suspected nuclear test conducted by the fictitious country of Arcania. It required the shipment of 40 tonnes of equipment to the Kazakh steppe to support simulated inspections carried out by 40 inspectors.[5]

## Nuclear Diplomacy

Kazakhstan's decision to remove all nuclear weapons, destroy nuclear weapons-related infrastructure and remove or secure nuclear material was not the only contribution towards nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. How it dealt with its Soviet nuclear legacy became an integral part of its identity as a nation eager to contribute to reducing nuclear dangers. Kazakhstan decided to play a significant role in global nuclear diplomacy. Two initiatives – one regional and one multinational – deserve special attention.

In 2006, Kazakhstan, together with its four Central Asian neighbours, created the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone. For Kazakhstan this step symbolised completing a full circle – it went from a Soviet republic at the heart of the one of the world's largest nuclear weapons programmes to a country that forever banned nuclear weapons from its territory. Not by accident, the treaty was signed in the city of Semipalatinsk.

The Central Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone wasn't the first in the world, but it was the first in the northern hemisphere and the first with stricter provisions than usual. For example, the Central Asian states committed not only to allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct regular checks on their peaceful nuclear activities but also committed to a more intrusive international inspection regime, provided under the IAEA Additional Protocol.[6]

Kazakhstan's decision to host the IAEA Low-Enriched Uranium (LEU) Bank is another important initiative and a good example of how the country's unique combination of political standing and peaceful nuclear facilities allow it to contribute to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. In 2006, a US non-governmental organisation, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, together with American billionaire Ted Turner, offered $50 million dollars towards establishing an international bank of low-enriched uranium. By 2009, the international community had collected another $100 million and in 2010 the IAEA approved the bank's establishment.[7]

The idea behind the LEU fuel bank is to give countries a reliable access to fuel for nuclear power plants for peaceful means that does not depend on commercial or political circumstances. The hope is that this extra assurance that countries will always have access to fuel will dissuade them from developing their own nuclear fuel production capabilities and possibly producing fuel for nuclear weapons. Fewer countries with indigenous nuclear fuel technology mean lower proliferation risks.

Kazakhstan was the only country to offer to host the IAEA LEU bank, and at the same time it was one of the most suitable countries to serve this role. As a result of the Soviet nuclear programme, Kazakhstan inherited the Ulba Metallurgical Plant of Project Sapphire fame. The Ulba facility, resurrected from the crisis of the early 1990s and with improved nuclear security conditions,

continues to produce nuclear fuel products for nuclear power plants around the world. As the Ulba facility already worked with and stored LEU, it could easily accommodate additional fuel under the auspices of the IAEA. Politically, as a developing non-Western country, Kazakhstan was seen as more attractive to other developing countries – the main target audience for the IAEA LEU bank. The only factor that worked against Kazakhstan was its geography – its land-locked status made transportation harder.

In 2019 the IAEA LEU Bank in Kazakhstan became operational when it received its first cylinders with LEU from France and Kazakhstan's own Ulba Metallurgy Plant. It will not provide a panacea for nuclear-related worries and no country, least of all Iran, for which the hopes were high, has so far expressed interest in buying fuel from the bank instead of developing their own. Nonetheless, it offers an additional tool for the international community to minimise proliferation risks, with Kazakhstan playing a central role.

## The Future

While Kazakhstan's foreign nuclear policy is straightforward and deserves praise, domestic nuclear policy is more complicated. Whether to develop nuclear power or not remains an open question. At least some in Kazakhstan see nuclear power as a promising cleaner source of energy. Currently, most of Kazakhstan's electricity comes from burning coal. Others question the feasibility and value of adding nuclear power plants to the mix when Kazakhstan can focus on energy efficiency of existing sources. Several attempts to jump-start a nuclear power programme have failed. Every few years, reports of agreements reached with Russian, Japanese, or other foreign partners, ready to build nuclear power plants in Kazakhstan surface. Kazakhstan's traumatic past with the Soviet nuclear tests is responsible for at least part of the negative public opinion on nuclear energy.

While debates on nuclear power are important, another domestic issue deserves much more attention and effort than it receives. And that is the wellbeing of the families living near the former nuclear testing site at Semipalatinsk. The legacy of nuclear tests persists. Medical experts confirm that children and grandchildren of those exposed to high levels of radiation during the period of Soviet nuclear tests have health higher risks, especially when it comes to cancer.[8] Families in rural areas often do not have easy access to medical services

and must travel to larger cities to receive treatment. Victims of Soviet nuclear tests in Kazakhstan live in difficult socio-economic conditions, typical for all rural areas in Kazakhstan, but such conditions are especially detrimental to those with vulnerable health. Going forward, it is the due care and attention to nuclear tests victims that will allow Kazakhstan to start healing from the trauma of the Semipalatinsk nuclear tragedy.

In its first 30 years of independence, Kazakhstan went from a Soviet republic with little agency over what was happening on its territory to an independent state with a clear and firm stance on its role in global nuclear politics. Its choices, ranging from giving up nuclear weapons to using the former nuclear testing site in support of the global ban on nuclear tests, from removing and securing nuclear material to hosting the IAEA LEU Bank, have made a significant difference to reducing nuclear dangers around the world.

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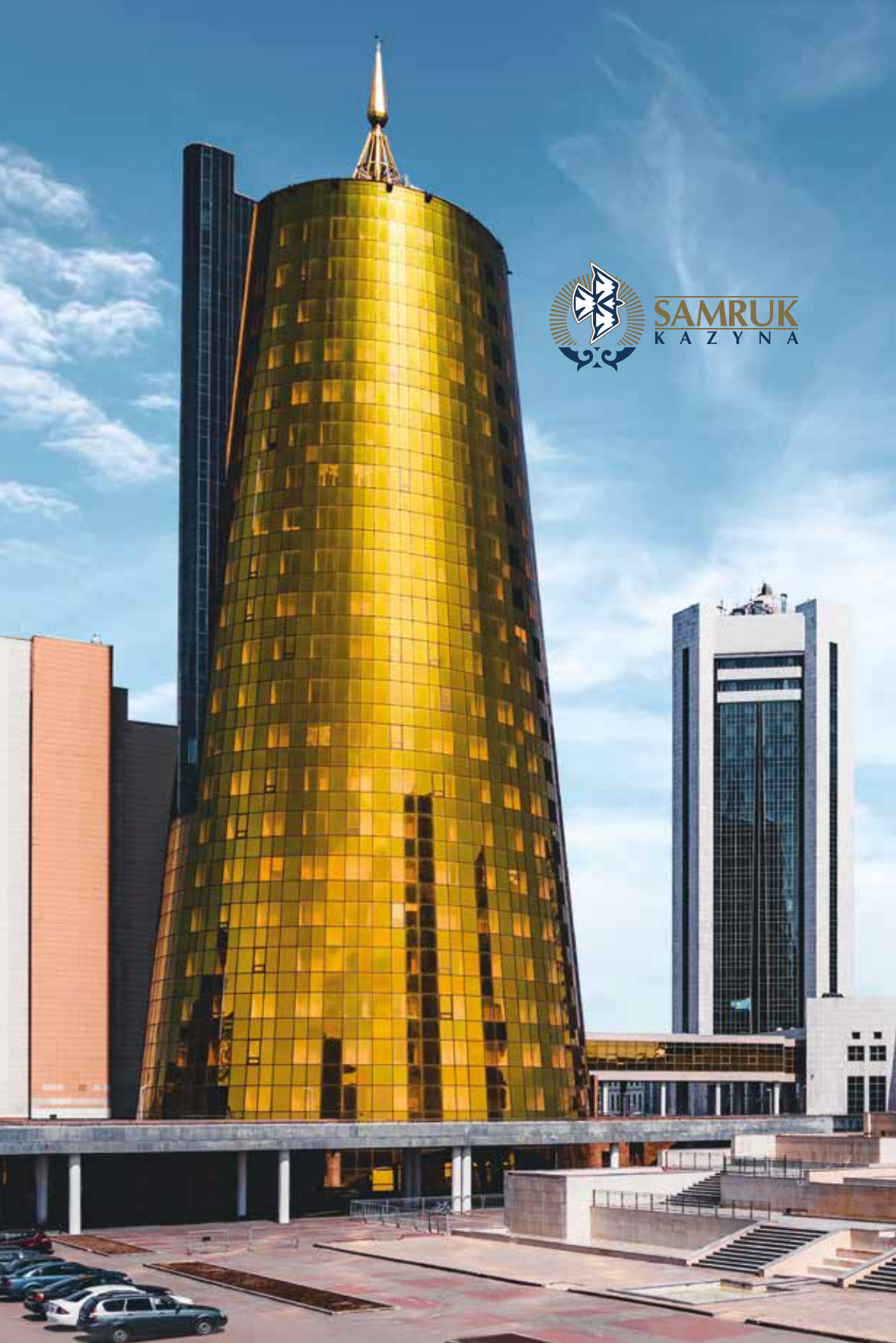
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KAZYNA

Chapter 7

# Economic development and reforms

SIR SUMA CHAKRABARTI and BAUR BEKTEMIROV

The modern economic history of Kazakhstan is a history of successful reforms and rapid evolution. Being a young country, Kazakhstan had a rare opportunity to adapt quickly to ever-changing global markets and introduce new institutions roughly every decade. As a result of this flexibility and exemplary leadership, Kazakhstan would emerge with new solutions and institutions in every large economic cycle.

Even before my more recent direct engagement with Kazakhstan, I have followed its development from the very early days. After gaining its independence in 1991, the country – just like any other former members of the Soviet Union – went through a challenging period of economic instability, recession, and hyperinflation. By 1995, the economy contracted by roughly a third due to the emigration of skilled personnel and weakening of its historical commercial and industrial ties within the rest of the former Soviet Union.

Facing such a considerable challenge, Kazakhstan needed to act quickly to turn the tables. New institutions and the transition to a market economy allowed Kazakhstan to arrest inflation in the second half of the 1990s. These new institutions also paved the way for the restoration of economic growth, driven by the extraction sector (primarily oil and gas), which quickly replaced the collapsed industrial sector. Simultaneously, the central authorities, led by First President Nursultan Nazarbayev, prepared a set of measures to modernise the economy and society. These measures, outlined in the first long-term Strategy 2030, determined Kazakhstan's economic development in the years to follow. They laid the foundation for Kazakhstan to progress as a growing economy and emerging regional leader.

In those years, the national economy had seen the creation of critical institutions, the implementation of numerous reforms in a wide range of

sectors, and changes in economic policies. As a result of these reforms and the effective use of natural resources, Kazakhstan achieved tangible results when entering the new millennium.

Kazakhstan became one of the largest producers of raw materials and achieved a high economic growth rate: GDP grew on average by 6.8 per cent per year in 2001-2016. Indeed, in the first decade of the century, Kazakhstan was the second-fastest growing economy in the world. Effective resource management policy allowed Kazakhstan to sustain economic growth even during the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the fall in oil prices in 2014–2015 when many other countries went into recession.

In the years since the start of the transition to a market economy, the country has built partnerships with leading international development institutions, invited multinational corporations, which brought investment and expertise to the country, and launched its own industry leaders. For example, during my time as President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, I witnessed Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund's growth and transformation. Samruk-Kazyna SWF manages and supports – to name a couple – such companies as KazAtomProm, the national uranium producer, or KazMunayGaz, the national oil & gas holding, both recognised global leaders in their respective industries. There are many more companies, both state-owned and private, which have proved competitive on international markets.

Kazakhstan has also achieved significant results in reducing poverty and nurturing the nascent middle class. Kazakhstan's poverty level fell from 55 per cent of the population in 2006 to 20 per cent in 2015, and the middle class increased from 10 per cent to 25 per cent. The improvement in the economic situation was achieved, in particular, due to an increase in income from paid employment: during the same period, Kazakhstan managed to create new jobs and reduce unemployment.

The broader inclusion of the population significantly affected the growth of gross domestic product. However, the country leadership's conscious decision to focus on commodity exports and quick capital formation had its side effects.

Apart from a relatively narrow oil and gas mining sector, new jobs were concentrated mainly in the non-tradable service sectors, characterised by low productivity. Meanwhile, a large share of the rural population remained self-

employed (including engagement in subsistence farming). Kazakhstan underwent a significant structural transformation in 2001–2016. The low-productivity agricultural sector lost numerous jobs; the subsequent redistribution of the labour force contributed to productivity growth, but only in a limited number of industries.

Most of the newly created jobs were in non-tradable service sectors, characterised by low productivity growth. The sectors with the highest levels of job creation (with double-digit growth rates) included public services, such as education or healthcare, construction, trade, transportation, and warehousing in the private sector.

A large part of the population did not have access to high-skilled jobs, which resulted in an increase in informal jobs and self-employment. Such an increase in the share of the self-employed population and individual entrepreneurs affects economic productivity. The reason is that self-employment usually does not provide opportunities for specialisation, cooperation, knowledge sharing, and also, to some extent, the development of social skills, all of which are significant for employment in larger enterprises.

Put simply, economic growth was driven by the mobilisation of labour and the use of new financial capital, but there was not a noticeable increase in labour productivity. Moreover, one could witness the economy's deindustrialisation – one of the middle-income trap symptoms – due to the increased interest in the mining sector with relatively small growth in new jobs and the influx of labour and capital into non-tradable sectors. The industrial development program positively impacted the economy; however, this impact was reduced when Kazakhstan faced large external shocks caused by the collapse in oil prices.

Kazakhstan still partially depends on natural resources. But managing natural resources is an arduous task as it requires adapting to volatile commodity markets and transforming natural resources into other productive forms of capital. While providing access to international capital, an abundance of natural resources can complicate diversification, productivity increases, and job creation.

Nevertheless, in the first 30 years, Kazakhstan's growth model was a great success, leading to the upgrading of the country to middle-income status: it mobilised labour resources, accumulated financial capital, and created subsequent investments. Kazakhstan also launched several essential state


Kazatomprom, leading global uranium producer, starts trading on the London Stock Exchange, 16th November 2018.


London
Stock Exchange

institutions, which set a foundation for future growth. We should recognise that in recent years Kazakhstan has successfully finished its transition from a low-income agricultural economy in the mid-1990s to an upper-middle-income level today. Yet, knowing the country's leadership and the national aspiration to enter the cohort of most competitive countries globally, this period is regarded as a stepping stone to greater success.

Thirty years since independence, and almost another 30 years before the 2050 benchmark specified in the longer-term strategic vision, is an excellent milestone to look back, celebrate the success, and set plans for the future. Today, Kazakhstan has a strong basis for growth. It is necessary now to implement structural reforms to further upgrade from middle-income class to high-income status. Most importantly, Kazakhstan needs to continue creating new tools and models based on modern institutions to face the post-pandemic challenges, new socio-economic world order, and new market landscape shaped by the fourth industrial revolution.

President Tokayev has made significant advances towards the Kazakhstan 2050 strategy's vision by outlining the new economic course and launching a bold set of reforms. Today, the Supreme Presidential Council for Reforms, chaired by President Tokayev, is working on improving all aspects of the nation's socio-economic development, including but not limited to macroeconomic policy, legal issues, social development, economic diversification, improving the business environment, and reforming public administration. The new economic course will support job creation in other tradable sectors and increase labour productivity through different policies.

Moving to a new economic course and achieving long-term sustainable, inclusive growth is challenging but a goal worth seeking. Kazakhstan has built all the necessary frameworks. Today, in search of new tools and pivots for improvement, it can turn to both international experience and its own short but quite eventful economic history. Several institutions and wise long-term decisions shaped the Kazakh economic landscape and can now inspire current policymakers to introduce new growth policies.

Let me mention three such institutions, launched in three different decades. Their transformation and unique features reflect the whole economy's flexibility and evolution.

One of the most critical institutions launched in the early days of Kazakhstan independence is, of course, the National Bank of Kazakhstan. As opposed to many developed countries, the central bank's creation came from necessity. Based on the remnants of *Gosbank*, the State Bank of the Soviet Union, the National Bank of Kazakhstan faced many challenges from day one but succeeded in embracing and promoting the spirit of the market economy. The introduction of the tenge currency and the development of an independent financial market were the fruits of this new spirit.

Economic transformation coupled with the turmoil in external markets put pressure on the tenge in the mid to late 1990s. Yet, the new government and National Bank successfully tamed inflation and faced the Asian financial crisis and Russian default aftermath. In those years, the National Bank of Kazakhstan had to adapt its operations, introduce new measures, and set new foreign exchange policies. Kazakhstan's success in becoming a mineral-exporting power and accumulating relatively large sovereign reserves was partially due to the right monetary policy adopted in the late 1990s through to the early 2000s.

In that time, the National Bank had received an additional mandate of managing the newly created National Fund of Kazakhstan, a sovereign fund created in the fashion of the Norwegian Pension Fund-Global, which proved to be an instrumental anti-crisis measure and development institutions in more recent years.

During the global financial crisis, the National Bank, perhaps inspired by the Bank of England, joined forces with the regulatory agency in a bold and timely decision to become the country's single mega-regulator. Nine years later, Kazakh policymakers were equally brave and intelligent to reverse this decision and create a new Agency for Regulation and Development of the Financial Market. It was a necessary decision, which fits the latest financial market circumstances much better.

Although the success of the first 20 years of economic policies was evident, post-crisis markets required a new approach and revolutionary policies. Amid another turbulent period of low oil prices, the National Bank decided to alter its foreign exchange policy and introduce a new monetary policy regime of inflation targeting. The new policy required a new toolset, a new decision-making process, and new communication policies. The National Bank team

had successfully prepared all the requirements to move to the inflation targeting regime in 2015.

The most recent change in the National Bank history was its transfer from Almaty to the capital, Nur-Sultan. While the decision wasn't as striking as the First President's decision to move the capital from Almaty more than two decades earlier, it followed the same spirit of commitment to constant exploration and improvement in the name of the well-being of Kazakh citizens. In its 30-year history, the National Bank has always been an example of timely economic policies, bold decisions, and creative solutions to fight crises, sustain growth, and inspire change.

Another example of timely decisions and successful adaptive policies at the institutional level is Samruk-Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund, mentioned earlier. It was first proposed as two separate development institutions: Samruk and Kazyna, inspired by Singaporean Temasek and Malaysian Khazanah fund, respectively. The idea was to introduce modern agencies in to the system to


The new headquarters of the Kazakhstan National Bank in Nur-Sultan.

manage state-owned enterprises and state development institutions. These funds' early success was in transforming national companies, introducing contemporary corporate governance, and launching several development institutions to support investment, grow small and medium enterprises, and create a channel to promote technological progress and innovation.

The idea proved to be even more successful during the global financial crisis, when the joint efforts of both funds, now rebranded as a single Samruk-Kazyna sovereign wealth fund, supported the economy and became the government's main anti-crisis instrument. Fiscal stimulus, support to the failing banking system, the introduction of new policies and vehicle for state's industrialisation programme – all came from the same institution, which to this day occupies an important place in the government economic policy landscape.

One exciting feature of the Samruk-Kazyna fund is that it never stops its development. The constant transformation process, adoption of new strategic mandates, active management of its portfolio companies show that the Fund never ceases to improve and never fails to reflect changes on local and global markets. The recognition of its portfolio companies' success, starting with KazAtomProm listed on the London Stock Exchange and Astana International Exchange, is shared by the international investor community.

Finally, the third wave of institutions is best represented by the Astana International Financial Centre. Started as an idea of the First President in 2015, it quickly grew from occupying the minds of a handful of people at the National Bank of Kazakhstan to the adoption of the new Constitutional Statute on the AIFC and changes in the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The latter is just another decision showing the ambition and bravery of the First President. A year later, that idea transformed into the common goal of a few dozen of Kazakhstan's brightest young minds and invited experts working to establish the new legal system, regulatory framework, modern market infrastructure, and environment, which enabled innovation and new entrepreneurship. It is the only jurisdiction on the vast Central Eurasian territory governed by English common law principles and enjoying independent regulation also recognised by the global community.

The Centre quickly grew and acquired important strategic partners. In 2017, Shanghai Stock Exchange and Nasdaq Group, two of the largest global

exchange conglomerates, invested in the new Astana International Exchange, which would later become home for Kazakh and the first foreign entities' public offerings. It hosts a cohort of new fintech companies and has also invited large strategic investors to be part of its ecosystem.

While being one of the youngest institutions, AIFC also recognises the need for constant evolution and growth. Its second five-year strategy adopted in 2020 saw the Centre's dual mandate as the central hub for financial intermediation


Official launch of the Astana International Financial Centre, 5th July 2018.

and the national platform for direct and portfolio investment, vital for the development in the post-pandemic world. The Centre still needs to solve several key issues to unlock its full potential. Yet, it has already become one of the main economic policy institutions and, more importantly, an example for other regional development organisations.

The desire to move and create new institutions and policies is consistent throughout the first 30 years of Kazakhstan's independence. This consistency


The headquarters of the Astana International Financial Centre in Nur-Sultan.

and continous development are reflected even in the external aesthetics and architecture of buildings, which host these various institutions. They range from the Soviet brutalist architecture of the old building of the National Bank in Almaty (now residing in a brand new building in the financial district of Nur-Sultan) to the grandiose towers of Samruk-Kazyna (later moved to a building in the new part of Nur-Sultan) and then to the modern eco-friendly infrastructure of Expo-2017 occupied by the AIFC. Different in their nature, these three Kazakh institutions share the same ambition to progress and evolve in the name of the well-being of its citizens. Being part of this journey is both a pleasure and an honour for any policymaker.

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Kazakhstan's currency, tenge.

Chapter 8

# The evolution of the Kazakh economy: Investments and future growth

ALAN SPENCE

As much as Kazakhs wanted independence from the Soviet Union as the latter collapsed in 1991, there were many amongst them – including in the senior Kazakh leadership – who felt such a move could well trigger economic ruin for the area still known at that time as the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR).

Occupying a huge landlocked area of some 2.7 million square kilometres between Russia in the north, China in the east, Central Asia's Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to the south, and the Caspian Sea (with no outlet to the world's oceans) to the west, the KSSR was arguably a very unattractive proposition as a standalone country. Although roughly the size of Western Europe, at around 17.5 million people Kazakhstan possessed only a fraction of the former's population, and a disproportionately high deficit of skilled human resources – particularly in the science and arts of self-government, public administration and economic management.

The public transport system was tired and slow – especially for a vast country with just a handful of concentrated population centres, ranging from the old regional capital of Almaty not far from its border with China in the south-east to the shores of the Caspian Sea in the west – a distance of around 3000 kilometres.

These days, the gleaming futuristic architecture of today's capital, Nur-Sultan, rises confidently to the sky from the endless steppe. Thirty years ago it was the location of Tselinograd (subsequently Akmola, then Astana, then Nur-Sultan), a faded provincial town on the Ishim River at the junction of the South Siberian and Trans-Kazakhstan Railways – and one-time regional headquarters

of President Khruschev's mixed-fortune Virgin Lands' Policy to make the Soviet Union the world's largest producer of grain.

In general, industry and agriculture gasped for modernisation and the investment that could help achieve it, but worse still the KSSR was horribly scarred by man-made environmental catastrophes. The Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site in the remote north-east steppe south of Kurchatov, was the location of nearly a quarter of the world's nuclear tests during the Cold War, creating a vast toxic wasteland with appalling effects on the local population visible to this day either through direct or inherited exposure.

Elsewhere, the Aral Sea, its feed water diverted by a disastrous Soviet irrigation scheme, was an eerie desert of rusting ships, its fishing industry decimated and surrounding agricultural areas impacted by dessicated mineral salt blow-off. Moreover, in the decades running up to Soviet collapse, the Caspian Sea had become polluted and over-fished to the point where the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation estimated hauls of Caspian kutum, one of the most common fish harvested, fell annually from around 1,250 tonnes in the 1950s to just over 200 tonnes in the early 1990s – with other specimens, once part of the staple catch of local fishing communities, teetering towards extinction.

Looking back many years later at the KSSR on the brink of independence, Ato Brown, who led World Bank operations in Kazakhstan between 2016-19, commented that "the legacy of the past has not made for an easy development journey for this young nation". Few would disagree.

So how did that journey start, where has it led, what has been achieved and, above all, what does the future hold for the Republic of Kazakhstan 30 years on from its declaration of independence on 16 December 1991, having first declared its sovereignty on 25 October 1990.

Building newly independent, self-sustaining sovereign states is not an everyday task, even if it is a task for every minute of every day, particularly as history shows they are often born amidst chaos and confusion, if not war or insurrection. Thankfully, the birth itself of Kazakhstan was relatively painless. The Soviet convoy – to vernacularly oversimplify – just ran out of drivable road and, ultimately, there was tacit agreement between its components that they should make their own way home cross-country….

As with all the former states of the Soviet Union, one of the major problems for Kazakhstan was the mismatch between opportunity and timing. The former was there for the taking, but the latter didn't bode well, largely due to the pace of events and its miasma of inherited problems.

However, in Nursultan Nazarbayev, the independent Republic of Kazakhstan's First President, the country had a leader whose experience (from Karaganda steel worker to President of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic), vision and energy were equal to the task.

In the dying days of the Soviet Union, President Mikhail Gorbachev was negotiating with US oil major Chevron for the latter to deploy its technology and expertise to open up the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan's eastern Caspian Sea region.

As leader of the KSSR, Nursultan Nazarbayev was an influential participant in the negotiations and when the collapse of the Soviet Union called time on the Moscow talks Nursultan Nazarbayev, now as President of the new Republic of Kazakhstan, moved quickly to sign up a joint venture with Chevron – Tengizchevroil – to liberate the massive latent wealth of the Caspian oil fields historically bedevilled by their sulphurous – sour – reserves.

Caspian oil became the country's prime hard currency generator, setting the now independent Kazakh economy on its remarkable road to sustainable economic transition and growth – a journey not only fuelled by the country's huge hydrocarbon reserves, but a natural resource base arcing across almost all 105 elements of the Periodic Table.

In the last 30 years exploration has continued to highlight the vastness of Kazakhstan's oil and non-oil reserves. At around 30 billion barrels, its oil reserves are the 12th largest in the world. Its share of world chromium reserves is 30 per cent, manganese 25 per cent, lead and zinc 13 per cent, uranium 12 per cent, and iron ore and copper 10 per cent. Other major deposits include molybdenum, tin, titanium, cobalt, gold and silver, as well as so-called rare earth metals. The latter, fundamentally important in the manufacture of, amongst other things, high frequency lasers, x-ray machines, advanced robotics, cell phones and electric car batteries, have been valued by the World Bank as potentially worth trillions of dollars.

Although back in the early 1990s the potential composition and value of its

mineral industry was less well-known and revolutionary new technology had yet to confer huge strategic and financial value on some minerals, such as rare earths, it was very clear that fate had dealt Kazakhstan a wonderful hand in natural resources.

But as card players know, a good hand is only worth having if you have the ability to play it to effect – and this is what Kazakhstan set out to acquire not only in relation to its mineral resources, but also its vast agricultural sector occupying 80 per cent of the country's landmass and the pre-eminence of its geo-strategic location between Europe and China, and South Asia and Russia.

This, in turn, meant addressing the huge domestic deficit in educated and skilled human resources to create and run new systems of government and public administration, as well as reconfigure and drive its creaking post-Soviet economy. Additionally, it also involved communicating to the world that Kazakhstan was enthusiastically seeking to engage with international trade and investment partners at all points of the compass.

President Nazarbayev began to address the human resource deficit by instigating the Bolashak (meaning "Future") Scholarship Programme whereby thousands of young Kazakhs were funded by the government to study abroad at some of the world's top universities, including those of the European Union and the United States, in subjects of value to a new country starting to make its way as an independent nation – such as law, public administration, economic management, engineering, medicine and logistics. The unfolding success of the programme made an immense contribution to the pace and depth of Kazakh development in the decades to follow as highly motivated young Kazakhs returned from Oxford, Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other centres of academic excellence to begin careers in such strategically important sectors as government, public administration, science and industry.

The Bolashak Scholarship Programme was also, in its own way, a strong statement by Kazakhstan that it was set on global engagement through a multi-vector foreign policy seeking partners based on the oft-repeated principle of peace and prosperity.

References to "peace" were not merely diplomatic abstraction, however. Newly-independent Kazakhstan's foreign policy intentions were generally

unknown – indeed many in government and industry around the globe had difficulty finding the country on a world map. To some this was more than a little disconcerting since Kazakhstan possessed the fourth largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world.

However, in a transformational move designed to assure the world of its global peaceful intentions the country quickly moved to have its massive inherited nuclear capability de-commissioned and removed – and to inaugurate a massive clean-up operation in the north-east of the country to remove the dark nuclear environmental stain on its territory and people. The destruction of weapons and the sealing of test facilities at Semipalatinsk was achieved primarily through a three-way partnership between the US, Russia and Kazakhstan with the latter, as part of the process, signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and becoming a global champion for nuclear disarmament.

The significance of Kazakhstan's important niche role as a force for nuclear disarmament should not be underestimated in the country's overall global reserves of diplomatic currency – indeed years later it was a key factor in its successful campaign to become Central Asia's first non-permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council in 2017/18.

President Nazarbayev's vision and tenacity were not only core to the country's successful nuclear disarmament policy and its many attendant benefits, but one of the key drivers of a foreign policy which pivoted in all directions – over time generating strategically important relationships with, amongst others, the European Union, Canada, the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom, whilst reaching out to the Middle East Gulf, the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia, and retaining close links with former members of the Soviet Union, especially Russia, through the Confederation of Independent States, and China.

As an internationally recognised new sovereign state, memberships of a swathe of organisations came largely as standard – the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank Group, as well as relevant regional international financial institutions, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Asian Development Bank and, much more recently, the new China-based Asian Infrastructure Development Bank.

It also became a member of the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1992 and pushed hard to join other organisations and in some

notable cases became a founder member of new ones – without disturbing the benign and productive balance of accumulated friendships and ties.

A secular state but with a 70 per cent majority Muslim population, Kazakhstan became a member of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation in 1995 and in 2001 joined with China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to create the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to promote regional security and trade. A founder partner of the Eurasian Economic Community in 2000 with Russia and Belarus, in 2015 – with the addition of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan – this morphed into the Eurasian Economic Union – a customs union of some 200 million people accessible by Kazakh and Kazakh-based exporters, including subsidiaries and joint ventures formed by western and other corporates. And in 2015, after long and complex negotiations, it achieved much-coveted membership of the World Trade Organisation – another major milestone on its quest to maximise effective participation in the global trade and investment arena.

In essence, Kazakhstan's extensive hard wiring of the global community generated circles of trust and understanding at official government level which not only provided much-needed access to bilateral and multi-lateral funding and technical assistance but also played a major role in generating business confidence amongst foreign private sector corporates and financial institutions.

These were encouraged to enter into trade deals and – the big prize for Kazakhstan's development ambitions – sign up for long-term foreign direct investment (FDI) projects.

From the beginning FDI combining funding with new technology was the key to getting the Kazakh economy moving post-independence as evidenced by President Nazarbayev's transformational deal with Chevron, which also involved Exxon Mobil as a 25 per cent shareholder.

Indeed, most of the FDI inflows in the earlier years were focussed on the energy industry, as well as other extractive industries – including, for example, uranium, production of which equated to 43 per cent of world supplies by 2020 with the assistance of, amongst others, French and Canadian mining interests.

Such valuable business prospects were often easier to market to oil and mining companies familiar with potentially lucrative frontier investments in areas often combining challenging infrastructure and harsh climates.

The same cannot always be said, however, about manufacturing, service and retail companies that Kazakhstan needed to attract to diversify and deepen industrial development and promote a broadly-based, balanced economy ultimately much less dependent on the price machinations of oil and non-oil mineral markets.

For these, and indeed all investors, Kazakhstan set about creating a benign FDI climate fundamentally based on stability and security, fiscal and regulatory incentives and a legal system which protected investors' minority rights and enforced the law of contract. Extensive incentive packages eventually became the basis of 13 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and 23 Industrial Zones designed to act as powerful engine houses of diversified growth, offering investors nil rates of corporate, land and property taxation in addition to exemption from customs duties.

SEZs, located at points of strategic pre-eminence such as the Caspian Port of Aktau, the capital Nur-Sultan and the Khorgos Gate on Kazakhstan's eastern border with China, further offered free land, simplified foreign employment regulations and the use of pre-established infrastructure and digital networks.

For some years the country adopted a generic marketing strategy lauding the advantages of investing in Kazakhstan more from macro-economic perspectives such as its natural resource and agricultural base, strategic position, and expanded transport infrastructure, allied with legal and fiscal incentives.

Later though it adopted a more calibrated and targeted approach through a new organisation, Kazakh Invest, which not only became a one-stop shop for corporates interested in investing in Kazakhstan, but a source of niche researched investment opportunities seeking FDI, particularly from corporates whose activities would help achieve greater industrial diversification.

Added to government measures to boost efficiency and simplify investors' experiences when dealing with Kazakhstan – such as visa-free travel from many countries, increased digitisation of documentation, including investment contracts, and quicker business registration – one-stop-shop engagement and signposting for investors played well in making Kazakhstan an increasingly attractive FDI location.

The first wave of new business travellers to the country didn't always experience the creature comforts they were used to elsewhere, but the neon

signage of top international hotel chains soon became more common in urban centres like Almaty, Astana/Nur-Sultan and Shymkent – and later ubiquitous as names like Hilton, Marriot, St Regis, Rixos, Ritz Carlton, Radisson and Intercontinental lit up the night skyline. Whilst themselves investors, such prestigious hotel brands also played an increasingly valuable role in the inward investment process, providing business executives with quality accommodation, as well as office space and services, and conference and entertainment facilities.

Given the size of the country, air travel was the only realistic choice during business visits, especially short ones. This took a major leap forward in 2001 with the creation of the country's flag carrier Air Astana, 51 per cent owned by the country's sovereign wealth fund Samruk Kazyna and 49 per cent by British Aerospace, now BAE Systems. Offering a range of regular internal flights between all leading domestic urban centres, Air Astana also steadily expanded its international flight programme to include strategically important destinations around the world, including the European Union, the Middle East and South and South-East Asia – all contributing to Kazakhstan's global connectivity and an international perception that the country was open for business – and, most of all, investment.

It was on the ground, though, rather than in the air, where strategic connectivity played its most transformational economic role – and will likely continue to do so as the country advances in to and beyond its fourth decade. In September 2013 China's President Xi Jinping symbolically unveiled his country's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at Nazarbayev University in the Kazakh capital. Linking China's east coast to Europe across 3000 kilometres of Kazakhstan, the BRI held out the prospect of catalytically fuelling an eventual trans-Kazakhstan development zone roughly following the line of the fabled Silk Routes of previous centuries.

Not surprisingly, Kazakhstan was soon widely known as the "buckle" on the "belt" as China-funded rail and logistics-related projects sprang up across the vast expanse of the steppe, syncing, where strategically appropriate, with Kazakhstan's own domestic Nurly Zhol infrastructure development programme launched in 2014 *(see below)* also, in part, aimed at improving Kazakhstan road and railway links.

The long-term benefits for the country from trans-Kazakhstan railways and road highways not only envisaged exponential growth in freight transit charges,

but a major step-change in logistics' efficiency for both domestic and Kazakh-based foreign companies trading within and beyond the country's borders, especially where tariff-free Eurasian Economic Union's customers beckoned.

Then, of course, there were the new economic opportunities from an increasingly empowered transport system which stretched several thousand kilometres across Kazakhstan – including the opening up of new agribusiness hubs or mining locations, as well as creating new value-added industries at enforced transhipment points.

The latter, for example, soon resulted in the creation of a world-scale dry port at the Khorgos Gate on the Kazakh-China border where changes in railway gauges required container transhipment by a system of huge gantry cranes before their journey east or west continued. This, in turn, offered opportunities for the development of value-added and other manufacturing opportunities in the nearby Khorgos East Gate Special Economic Zone – potentially of strategic interest to foreign investors in partnership with domestic companies.

As the country approached its 30th anniversary, accumulated net FDI during the previous three decades was estimated at well over $360 billion across all sectors of the economy with headline names including: Chevron, Shell, Exxon Mobil and ENI (oil and gas); Alsthom (electric locomotives); General Electric (diesel locomotives); Danone (food processing); the Linde Group and Henkel (chemicals); Airbus (spacecraft); Knauf (construction); Heidelbergcement (construction materials); Glencore (mining); Rio Tinto (metallurgy); Polpharma (pharmaceuticals); Hitachi (various equipment and electronics); and Metro, a German cash-and-carry company which since 2008 had steadily opened eight stores in seven Kazakh cities.

Albeit with a continuing strong focus on hydrocarbons and the extractive sector – underpinned by favourable changes in the mining code – the country had increasingly seen investment in agribusiness, mechanical engineering and processing industries, especially petrochemicals and metals. Also, diversification had increasingly assumed a significance much beyond the achievement of a much wider, varied, value-added and thus sustainable industrial base.

More transformationally still, the country embraced renewable energy supplies, focusing on solar and wind energy, and revealed its ambition to create a multi-facetted international financial centre at the core of Central Asia – the

Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC) – in the daily time zone between financial trading in Hong Kong and Singapore and Europe.

Although a country yet to tap the full potential production of hydrocarbons (its new world-scale Kashagan Oil Field in the Caspian Sea, for example, had still to get into its stride), Kazakhstan enthusiastically began to engage its eventual usurper – renewable green energy. This was in line with the strategic objective of broadening the country's energy supply mix and, ultimately, creating net-zero carbon energy generation as its contribution towards addressing climate change. Moreover, evolving green industries offered yet another area of business attractive to foreign investors.

In late 2012, after years of alternative energy featuring as a core element of Kazakh-hosted international conferences and exhibitions, the country was chosen by the Paris-based Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) as the venue for the 2017 World Expo focusing on future energy supplies. *Expo 2017 Astana – Future Energy* was designed to act as a creative crucible for new, alternative energy ideas and technology designed to secure net zero carbon global growth. Attended by governments, NGOs, industrial and financial leaders, and energy academia, as well as the public, the exhibition's buildings and infrastructure were created on a greenfield site towards the outskirts of Astana and featured the world's largest glass sphere as its centrepiece.

Fittingly, shortly after the three-month event ended, the Expo complex was itself renewably used as the headquarters of the AIFC which, again fittingly, offered as part of its many different services, a niche renewable green finance window.

Kazakhstan's commitment to green energy-driven sustainable growth was another key component of its successful bid to become a non-permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council in 2017/18.

Overall, green energy only met around five per cent of overall demand, as Kazakhstan approached the brink of its fourth decade with dependence on gas and oil set to continue for the foreseeable future. However, this fourth decade could see a sharp rise in green power generation, focussing in particular on solar and wind power, but also including biomass and hydro-electric power. Whether that will achieve forecasts of meeting up to 30 per cent of demand will depend, initially, on post-Covid financial and industrial dynamics, albeit the country's green ambitions are well-supported by, amongst others, international

financial institutions, including the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

In March 2021, EBRD agreed to develop a long-term co-operation strategy with Kazakhstan designed to achieve carbon neutrality in power generation by 2060 which, according to EBRD, would "further cement Kazakhstan's status as a regional renewable energy leader in Central Asia".

EBRD's green energy partnership with Kazakhstan began a decade earlier with the London-based institution's steady build-up of support for the country's renewable energy drive yielding 14 projects worth $535 million financed by early 2021. The EBRD-Kazakh co-operation strategy focussed on green energy generation, carbon market development, refurbishing and upgrading the electrical grid and decommissioning aging thermal capacity.

The country's other great third decade transformational project was to establish the AIFC as Central Asia's national, regional and international financial markets hub – a decision significantly reflecting the additional funding requirements and opportunities stemming from China's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as Kazakhstan's own Nurly Zhol infrastructure programme. Launched by President Nazarbayev in 2014, Nurly Zhol's objective was to expand and upgrade all aspects of Kazakhstan's infrastructure – industrial, energy, public utilities, housing, social and SMEs.

The AIFC, officially launched in July 2018, embraced a number of different financial operations and markets, including the Astana International Exchange (AIX), Islamic Finance, Green Finance and a FinTech research and development crucible whereby inventors of new financial technology would receive funding and appropriate facilities. AIX included the public trading of equities and capital market debt designed to extend and underpin private sector participation in not only the Kazakh economy, but those of the surrounding region. It was particularly envisaged as a privatisation vehicle to help facilitate privatisation of huge state-owned assets such as nuclear holding company Kazatomprom and the national railway company Temir Nur Zhol.

In a bid to elicit international confidence in this enormously ambitious institution, it was decided that the AIFC's Court for settling disputes relating to activities and operations in the AIFC would be settled by the norms and principles of English law – the first time that such provisions had applied

Opening of the EXPO 2017 International Specialised Exhibition themed Future Energy, 9th June 2017.

anywhere in Central Asia, and an initiative which resonated well amongst the foreign investment community beyond its specific AIFC role.

Ahead of the global economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, FDI had long become one of the most important drivers of the Kazakh economy, often helping to achieve double-digit annual economic growth, and, according to the World Bank, generating a six-fold increase in per capita GDP during the first two decades of the 21st Century, lowering the incidence of poverty, increasing shared prosperity and in the process graduating from lower-middle-income to upper-middle-income status.

In late 2012 the country's various development initiatives across all sectors were embodied in an over-arching national plan announced by President Nazarbayev in his State of the Nation Address entitled *Strategy 2050* designed to raise Kazakhstan into the ranks of the world's top-30 most developed countries by the middle of this century.

Can *Strategy 2050* achieve its objective? One big lesson from the Covid-19 crisis is that a sudden unforeseen event of such unprecedented magnitude can render forecasts of most things redundant, practically overnight. If a further number of years of growth and development are lost in the first half of the 21st Century to catastrophic 'unknowns', Kazakhstan, like many other countries, would be hard pressed to make the progress it had envisaged by 2050.

On the other hand, the country has weathered oil price crashes and proven itself resilient during the global financial crash and great recession of 2007-09, and it moves beyond its 30th Anniversary in a structurally stronger position to confront previously 'known' forms of economic dislocation – unwelcome as these would be.

But there is still much to be done – as made clear by a report released in early 2021 by the Kazakh Council on International Relations on the second anniversary of President Tokayev 's arrival in office. Whilst affirming that during the First President's 28 years in office Kazakhstan "had emerged as a well-established and internationally recognised sovereign state with all the necessary attributes" there were, nevertheless, factors impeding progressive development. These included continued dependence on commodity production, low competitiveness in manufacturing, limited finance for SMEs, uneven regional

development, skilled labour shortages and "some measure" of corruption and opacity in public administration.

The task ahead for President Tokayev will not be easy, not least because 30 years in the life of a new nation is, relatively speaking, hardly any time at all, especially given the extent of the global tumult most countries experienced, culminating in a health pandemic which had dominated more than two-thirds of the new President's time in office by the country's 30th Anniversary.

That said, President Tokayev was quick to unleash a broad swathe of reforms and initiatives integratively aimed at maximising the long-term wellbeing of the Kazakh people for which there is no alternative to "a truly diversified, technological economy".

As the country began its progression into its fourth decade it was more committed than ever to achieving a successful outcome for its privatisation programme begun in 2016, reducing the role of government in the economy, facilitating a much greater role for private enterprise and fair competition, combatting corruption, and boosting competitiveness through technological effectiveness, especially digitisation, and renewed focus on the development of human capital.

And if effectively driven through, these – coupled with unfolding political and social reforms and 30 years of major economic accomplishments – look set to play a crucial role in pursuit of *Strategy 2050's* transformational aspirations.

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AIFC Court and IAC Premises in Nur-Sultan.

Chapter 9

# A modern business climate in Kazakhstan: Dispute resolution at the AIFC

The Rt Hon. THE LORD WOOLF, CH
and CHRISTOPHER CAMPBELL-HOLT

The creation of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC) in Kazakhstan is a hugely important step in assisting Kazakhstan to become a more competitive economy regionally and globally. The formation of such international financial centres has become a common strategic focus for rapidly emerging and modernising states. Their presence assists with the creation and redistribution of world financial income, attracting capital, generating income from taxes, contributing to the innovative development of economies and increasing the role of states in global governance. By eliminating barriers between domestic and global financial markets, developing ties between them, these centres have been proven to attract foreign investment.

Since 2018, the AIFC has been officially operating in Nur-Sultan, formerly Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan. The AIFC Court and the International Arbitration Centre (IAC) are two distinct and important independent bodies providing international standard commercial dispute resolution at the AIFC.

The *Elbasy* of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, showed great vision in creating the AIFC. His intention to do so was reflected in The Plan of the Nation *100 Concrete Steps* which was the next step to implement five institutional reforms, as announced at the XVI Congress of The Nur Otan Party on 11 March 2015 to achieve "modern state for all". There would be an international financial centre in Astana (Nur-Sultan). The international centre was to include a court which would be founded on the principles of English law.

In the Article of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan *The Nation's Plan – The Road to the Kazakhstani Dream*, it was stated: "The central question of the third direction of the Nation's Plan is the creation of the Astana International Financial Centre with an independent judicial system, a separate jurisdiction based on the principles of English law, with the application of English language and the introduction of the investment residency principle."

The full significance of this initiative has to be seen against the background of the changes that had already taken place in Kazakhstan's legal system. This is not a common law system but a civil law system, bearing close relation to the systems to be found in the majority of centres on the mainland of Europe.

The Republic of Kazakhstan's judiciary had already been the subject of reform. In 2000, a Decree of the First President was adopted that separated the Executive from the existing judiciary and transferred the operation of the courts in Kazakhstan from the Ministry of Justice to the Committee of Court Administration under the Kazakhstan Supreme Court. That court was already established in the Supreme Court's world class building in Nur-Sultan.

However, the effect of the announcement of the First President at the opening of the XVI Congress meant inevitably there was to be a new system of justice to support the AIFC.

It would mean that there would be two systems of justice in Kazakhstan – its traditional system and a new system supported by the AIFC Court and IAC. Both the AIFC Court and IAC now provide critically important support for the role of the AIFC and ensure that the AIFC is a flagbearer for the rule of law. This flag is a huge support for the commercial activities of the AIFC.

From February 2017, Mr. Christopher Campbell-Holt, the Registrar and Chief-Executive of the AIFC Court and IAC and myself, were engaged by the AIFC to advise on the establishment of the AIFC Court and IAC. From 1 January 2018, the AIFC Court and IAC, which were established in a record time as separate independent legal entities, became fully operational. They were established following the approval of the AIFC Court Regulations 2017 and AIFC Arbitration Regulations 2017 by the AIFC Management Council.

Before this could happen, the Parliament of Kazakhstan enacted the AIFC

AIFC courtroom in Nur-Sultan.

Grand opening of the AIFC Court and IAC building, July 2019.

Constitutional Statute 2015 which provided for the establishment of the AIFC. More specifically, this statute provided for the establishment of the AIFC Court in Article 13 which provides that the AIFC Court shall be "independent in its activities and is not part of the judicial system of the Republic of Kazakhstan", and Regulation 11 of the AIFC Court Regulations 2017 provides for the judges of the AIFC Court to have "complete independence" and "act independently and impartially" when performing their judicial functions. Article 14 of the AIFC Constitutional Statute provided for the establishment of the IAC and the AIFC Arbitration Regulations 2017 and IAC Arbitration and Mediation Rules 2018 provide requirements of independence and impartiality for arbitrators.

In March 2017 the Constitution of Kazakhstan was amended to enable there to be a legal regime for a financial centre, the AIFC, in Nur-Sultan, in Kazakhstan.

I became the AIFC Court's first Chief Justice from 1 January 2018. I retired on 31 January 2020 and from 1 February 2020 The Rt. Hon. The Lord Mance, the former Deputy President of the UK Supreme Court, was appointed to be the new Chief Justice of the AIFC Court. Since 1 January 2018 Ms. Barbara Dohmann QC has been the IAC Chairman and Mr. Christopher Campbell-Holt has been the Registrar and Chief Executive of the AIFC Court and IAC.

Now, at the heart of the AIFC is a legal system that has been created to apply common law and international best practices to attract investment by enabling effective commercial practices and providing robust protection of investor rights. The AIFC Court and IAC are the ultimate safeguards to protect investor rights at the AIFC and they provide justice that accords with the rule of law.

The rule of law is a concept whose precise meaning is difficult to define. It has been defined in a book by the same name by one of the UK's most distinguished judges, the late Lord Bingham. He noted that the rule of law takes its identity from its context, so it is important to ascertain its meaning from the context in which it is being considered. The rule of law has many requirements. In particular, it requires that every individual is entitled to have access to a court or dispute resolution forum for the determination of his or her rights and to be treated equally and fairly in the same way as anyone else subject to the court's or dispute resolution forum's jurisdiction. Every party

in a dispute deserves to have his or her case determined in accordance with the law of the land. This includes having fair consideration of the dispute by independent and incorruptible judges, arbitrators, or other types of dispute resolution professionals, who conduct the case and give a decision with reasonable expedition. Citizens who live in a country which adheres to the rule of law can be confident that their disputes will be resolved in a just manner and that justice will not only be done but it will also be seen to be done.

The reason why the AIFC Court and IAC were established is relevant to the consideration of what the rule of law requires. The AIFC required a special court and arbitration centre to be created because it appreciated that its prospect of success as a commercial centre would be greatly increased if investors involved with the AIFC, many of whom are likely to come from outside Kazakhstan, are satisfied that the AIFC is a safe environment in which to invest. International investors look to invest in jurisdictions which recognise and apply the rule of law. Any commercial decision outside of an investor's home jurisdiction involves increased risk. Investors know that from time-to-time disputes in business will arise and they may well require the assistance of a court or arbitration centre to resolve them. When this happens, they want to be protected by the rule of law. Risk is significantly reduced if there is a court and arbitration centre which complies with the requirements of the rule of law.

In recent times courts and arbitration centres similar to the AIFC have been established in other countries – Singapore, Hong Kong, Qatar, Dubai and Abu Dhabi – where new commercial centres have been created to attract investment. Other countries inherited common law systems including commercial law from the UK, including Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia and New Zealand. Like the AIFC, these jurisdictions have systems of justice which are substantially based on the common law system of justice designed to operate in accord with the rule of law. The models of commercial dispute resolution institutions in all these jurisdictions were considered when deciding upon the model which should be adopted at the AIFC.

The AIFC Court and IAC are still in their early years of operation but outstanding results have been achieved ahead of time and more quickly than at any other international financial centre. By the end of September 2021, the AIFC court had already given 17 judgements and orders and additional cases were

ongoing. All resolved cases had been enforced in Kazakhstan to one hundred percent satisfaction. 708 arbitration and mediation cases had been successfully resolved at the IAC. The cases at the IAC consisted of 64 arbitration cases and 644 mediation cases, reflecting the appetite for commercial parties in disputes in Kazakhstan to resolve their disputes amicably via mediation without needing to pursue more formal arbitration or litigation.

The case parties came from Kazakhstan, the UK, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Poland, Azerbaijan, Turkey and India. The law applied in the cases was predominantly the law of the AIFC, Kazakhstan, and Russia. The nature of the disputes covered all areas of commercial practice including finance, sales, property, land, and general contract matters. A total of 213 lawyers from 24 jurisdictions around the world (22 countries) had registered with the AIFC Court for rights of audience. The AIFC Court and IAC were included in the dispute resolution clauses of thousands of business contracts of businesses in Kazakhstan and elsewhere.

The AIFC and IAC are playing a central role in establishing Kazakhstan as a successful commercial centre with all of the facilities and international standards that investors expect of such institutions. The establishment of the AIFC Court and IAC will significantly increase the attractiveness and investment in the AIFC, Kazakhstan and the wider Central Asia region where at present there are no comparable commercial dispute resolution institutions.

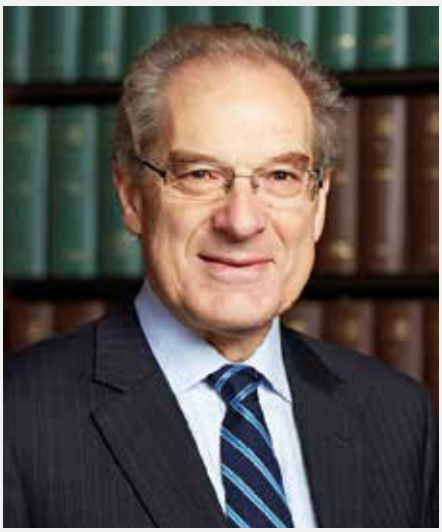
### Judges, arbitrators, mediators and other dispute resolution professionals

The current Chief Justice of the AIFC Court, Lord Mance, is supported by nine judges. The judges are amongst the most experienced and distinguished judges from the common law world. The IAC has in addition to its Chairman, Barbara Dohmann QC, a Panel of outstanding arbitrators and mediators comprising highly experienced and multi-lingual professionals from around the world.

The judges, arbitrators, mediators and other dispute resolution professionals at the AIFC Court and IAC have global reputations for absolute independence, impartiality, integrity and incorruptibility. They are committed to the rule of law and uphold the same judicial standards and legal principles that have been developed and applied over many years by commercial dispute resolution centres in the UK and elsewhere. In particular, they all have considerable


Judges of the AIFC Court.

Kazakh finalists and judges at the AIFC Court and IAC Moot Final, October 2019.



Lord Mance, Chief Justice of the AIFC Court.

Barbara Dohmann QC, IAC Chairman.

experience and interactions over many years with commercial entities and individuals who they represented as lawyers.

That background gives them experience and understanding of the commercial world and they understand the need for commercial law to reflect the needs of the business community. They will ensure that the AIFC Court and IAC meet the expectations of the international business community by providing predictable legal protection in a timely manner. Parties to disputes at the AIFC Court and IAC can be confident that their disputes will be decided only on their merits without regard to nationality, politics, religion or race.

## Services

The AIFC Court provides litigation proceedings within the most modern procedural rules modelled on the rules of other common law courts including the courts of England and Wales. It also provides Judicial Mediation, that is mediation of a dispute pre-litigation by a judge of the AIFC Court. If the case progressed to litigation at the AIFC Court it would be heard by a different judge. The judges of the AIFC Court also have considerable experience of commercial arbitration and the AIFC Court provides limited supervision of IAC arbitration cases guided by the principle of non-intervention.

The IAC provides four main dispute resolution services:

1. Arbitration – exclusive administration of arbitrations governed by the IAC Arbitration and Mediation Rules, subject to the agreement of the parties to a case; administered arbitrations governed by UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules and ad hoc arbitration rules subject to the agreement of the parties to a case;

2. Mediation – mediations governed by the IAC Arbitration and Mediation Rules and *ad hoc* mediation rules subject to the agreement of the parties to a case, as well as other forms of alternative dispute resolution subject to the agreement of the parties to a case;

3. Appointments – an appointment authority, assisting with the appointment of arbitrators and mediators to arbitrations and mediations conducted at the IAC or elsewhere; and

4. Fundholding – fundholding, holding and disbursing advances in relation to costs associated with use of the IAC's services and facilities.

### Jurisdiction, levels, precedent and rights of audience

The AIFC Court has the sole power to determine the proper scope of its jurisdiction within the limits of its competence given by the AIFC law. It does not have jurisdiction to hear administrative[1] or criminal cases but it does have jurisdiction to:

1. Interpret AIFC Regulations; and

2. Adjudicate any disputes:
   a) between AIFC registered companies ("AIFC Participants"), AIFC bodies and or their foreign (i.e. non-Kazakh nationals) employees;

   b) relating to operations carried out in the AIFC and regulated by the AIFC Acting Law; and

c) transferred to the Court by agreement of the parties (i.e. "opt-in" jurisdiction for parties who do not otherwise have any connection to the AIFC). Parties may file applications to the AIFC Court applying any law, whether it is common law or civil law, AIFC law or otherwise, provided all of the parties to the case agree and the AIFC Court decides that it is appropriate for it to have jurisdiction.

Similar to other international arbitration centres, the IAC considers disputes where the governing law of the dispute is AIFC law or any other law as agreed by the parties to the dispute. The AIFC Arbitration Regulations provide the AIFC as the seat in an arbitration at the IAC where the seat has not been agreed by the parties. But parties can agree to have an alternative jurisdiction as the seat in their arbitration proceedings at the IAC if they agree to do so. We provided this flexibility at the IAC to give case parties maximum choice and flexibility and to enable dispute resolution on legal and procedural terms that most appropriately fits the needs of the parties and justice in each individual case.

AIFC Court hearing.

Launch of the eJustice system, February 2019.

The AIFC Court has three different levels:

1. The Small Claims Court as a division of the AIFC Court of First Instance, with specialist judges and procedures for cost-effective and timely resolution of disputes valued up to US$150,000;

2. The AIFC Court of First Instance is the first court where disputes are heard applying the AIFC Court's Rules. It also considers appeals from the AIFC Small Claims Court; and

3. The AIFC Court of Appeal will hear appeals from the AIFC Court of First Instance. Its decisions are final and not subject to appeal. To appeal to the AIFC Court of Appeal requires litigants to have been given permission to appeal by the AIFC Court of First Instance or the AIFC Court of Appeal. The AIFC Court has already successfully resolved numerous small claims and first instance claims and a permission to appeal application.

The AIFC Court may consider final judgments of the AIFC Court in related matters and final judgments of the courts of other jurisdictions when deciding cases. While there is no automatic binding precedent of previous AIFC Court decisions on future AIFC Court decisions, it is expected that the flexibility inherent in the procedures and the approach that is expected to be adopted at the AIFC Court will enable the AIFC common law system to develop principle incrementally and keep up to date without producing uncertainty.

Within the framework of AIFC statute or written AIFC law, the AIFC law will be developed by the judges of the AIFC Court through their decisions in cases, with application of legal principles to new circumstances in a way that will be sensitive to the particular commercial context of the case in dispute. AIFC Court decisions will also continue to be made accessible and transparent via the AIFC Court website and in law reports, textbooks, and media which will analyse the effect of the decisions with a view to identifying the principles

that underlie them. This will assist parties and their lawyers to understand their legal positions under the AIFC law and to be able to make a reasonable prediction of the outcome of any disputes that will be considered by the AIFC Court.

The AIFC Court has extremely wide rights of audience. All lawyers have rights of audience provided the lawyer has a practicing certificate from anywhere in the world, or in the case of Kazakhstan lawyers, qualified by a law degree and some court experience. There is this special rights of audience provision for Kazakh lawyers to create a level playing field. In Kazakhstan there is no centrally administered regulatory body to regulate the training and practices of lawyers and without this special rights of audience provision they would not be able to represent parties in cases at the AIFC Court. By comparison, the IAC is accessible to all lawyers and professionals to represent parties in cases at the IAC.


Signing of the MoU between AIFC Court, IAC and EUROBAK.

## Rules

The procedural rules of the AIFC Court and IAC were drafted by leading dispute resolution professionals including myself, Barbara Dohmann QC, Tom Montagu-Smith QC, and Mr. Christopher Campbell-Holt. When creating a new judicial system, it is all too easy to overcomplicate matters by underestimating the importance of a court and arbitration centre having the appropriate powers and avoiding unnecessary complexities which can delay or restrict justice. With this in mind, professionals drafted practical procedural rules for the AIFC Court and IAC that will foster predictability and enable cases to be dealt with in a way that is proportionate to their complexity. The procedural rules include all of the modern innovations of other international dispute resolution institutions and are sensitive to the unique needs of commercial court and dispute resolution institution users – but in as short a number of rules as possible to avoid unnecessary complexity.

The procedural rules of the AIFC Court and IAC clearly set out their approach. The AIFC Court Rules 2018 provide at Rule 1 that the AIFC Court has the overriding objective to deal with cases justly. This includes, so far as practicable: ensuring that the system of justice is accessible and fair; that the parties are on an equal footing; that litigation takes place expeditiously and effectively, using no more resources than is necessary; dealing with cases in ways that are proportionate to the amount of money involved, the importance of the case, the complexity of the issues, facts and arguments, and the financial position of each party; and making appropriate use of IT. Rule 2.1 provides that the overriding objective of the IAC is to obtain the fair resolution of disputes by an impartial tribunal without unnecessary delay or expense.

There are other more specific rules in the AIFC Court and IAC Rules but they do no more than amplify or illustrate the overriding objectives. They give the judges of the AIFC Court and the arbitrators and mediators of the IAC the wide discretion and flexibility they need to do justice in cases.

## Enforcement of AIFC Court and IAC decisions and awards

Enforcement of AIFC Court decisions and IAC arbitration awards is critically important. If this cannot happen, the successful party in a dispute resolution will be left with a sense of injustice. It is this fear of injustice that deters investors who

could profitably trade with a particular country from doing so, to the economic disadvantage of the country with which they could have otherwise traded.

Enforcement of AIFC Court decisions within Kazakhstan is carried out in the same manner as the enforcement of decisions of other courts in the Kazakhstan legal system. Translations of the AIFC Court's decisions into the Russian and Kazakh languages are authorised by the Court in accordance with the AIFC Acting Law and provided to the Kazakhstan authorities for enforcement purposes. In practice, enforcement of AIFC Court decisions in Kazakhstan is ensured by the implementation of step-by-step procedures of the AIFC Court and the enforcement authorities in Kazakhstan. These are implemented with the closest supervision of the AIFC Court Registry and the enforcement agents, and the result by the end of November 2020 was that all AIFC Court decisions had been enforced within Kazakhstan to one hundred percent satisfaction.

Enforcement of AIFC Court decisions in other countries outside of Kazakhstan will happen with the support of the Kazakhstan authorities in accordance with international agreements that provide for mutual recognition

Contestants at the AIFC Court and IAC Moot Final, October 2019.

and enforcement of court decisions. The AIFC Court is also a member of the Standing International Forum for Commercial Courts and works in close cooperation with its members, including on enforcement of court decisions.

IAC arbitration awards are enforced in Kazakhstan as Orders of the AIFC Court. The procedure to convert an IAC arbitration award into an Order of the AIFC Court for enforcement purposes is simple and expedient. IAC arbitration awards have been recognised by the AIFC Court and judgments and execution orders of the AIFC Court have been given within a matter of hours of such applications being filed at the AIFC Court Registry. Kazakhstan acceded to the New York Convention 1958 and enforcement of IAC arbitration awards in countries outside of Kazakhstan shall happen in accordance with that Convention.

### IT and premises

The AIFC Court and IAC have international standard physical premises at the EXPO-2017 site in Nur-Sultan with advanced meeting and conference rooms, hearing rooms, and office facilities for all lawyers, judges, arbitrators and mediators.

The AIFC Court and IAC also have innovative modern digital technology to assist with timely and cost-effective case management and overall dispute resolution. eJustice was launched at the AIFC Court and IAC in February 2019. This provides immediate electronic access to all documents in a given case to the parties, judges, arbitrators and mediators working on that case from its initiation to its final disposition. Access is 24/7. Video technology is used for oral hearings when a judge, arbitrator or mediator decides that an in-person hearing is not necessary or appropriate.

### Education

The judges', arbitrators' and mediators' experience has been shared in Kazakhstan, promoting the education and training of students and lawyers with lectures and mock trials. This has significantly improved the understanding in the Kazakhstan community on the AIFC law and the AIFC Court and IAC procedures and practices to ensure there is access to justice that is as wide as possible.

The successful establishment and operation of the AIFC Court and IAC has ensured that the AIFC has a dispute resolution system that applies the


AIFC presentation at Kazakhstan's Supreme Court, April 2019.

strictest standards of the rule of law. With proven case resolution numbers, enforcement of decisions, inclusion in the dispute resolution clauses of business contracts, and significant outreach, promotions and training programmes, both institutions are quickly becoming the number one choice for commercial dispute resolution for investors engaging in commercial and financial activities in Central Asia. This will be a powerful signal to the international commercial world that Kazakhstan has a modern business environment that is committed to the strictest adherence to the rule of law.

*The Rt Hon. The Lord Woolf CH is former Chief Justice of the AIFC Court, and Christopher Campbell-Holt is Registrar and Chief Executive of the AIFC Court and International Arbitration Centre.*

*Endnote*

1. The term "administrative" is used to refer to matters such as road traffic offences or immigration issues which are dealt with by the RK Administrative Court. It is not intended to limit the review by the AIFC Court or an AIFC Body such as AFSA, the AIFC regulator. It differs from its meaning in English law. See AIFC Court Regulations 2017, Article 26(5), which provides that: "The [AIFC] Court of First Instance has jurisdiction to hear and determine an appeal from the decision of an AIFC Body … where the appeal relates to: (a) a question of law; (b) an allegation of a miscarriage of justice; (c) an issue of procedural fairness; or (d) a matter provided for in or under AIFC law."

Chapter 10

# The UK-Kazakhstan strategic partnership: Time to re-centre the pivot on Central Asia's powerhouse

Colonel The Rt Hon. BOB STEWART DSO MP

Anniversaries are a good time to reflect, to look back on how events have shaped us. But equally they are also a time to look to the future, set goals and make plans. It is with that sense of pride in what has been achieved already and optimism for the future that in 2021 we mark the 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence.

This chapter concentrates on the strength and breadth of the United Kingdom's and Kazakhstan's strategic relationship. In truth the United Kingdom was one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Kazakhstan. From the start we British firmly applauded Kazakhstan's right to self-determination and its future as a successful sovereign state.

Since then and over the course of 30 years, we have seen many engagements between Her Majesty the Queen and Kazakhstan's Founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev. HRH The Prince of Wales visited Kazakhstan in 1996, and the Duke of Gloucester became the most recent member of the Royal Family to travel to Kazakhstan to open the UK's Pavilion at the Astana 2017 International Expo.

In 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron made a historic and, frankly, long overdue, visit to Kazakhstan, ushering in a new era of strategic partnership between the two countries. The first serving British prime minister to visit Kazakhstan, Mr Cameron took this important relationship to a new level – a relationship based on strong economic ties, close cooperation on security and defence, and on increasing links between our people. The talks during the visit resulted in multibillion-dollar trade and investment deals as well as the launch of a Strategic Partnership, a major vehicle for political consultations. Over the

ensuing years the Strategic Partnership has been sustained by various meetings of the Heads of State and Government, by thematic consultations at ministerial level, bilaterally and in other fora, as well as by meetings between the relevant officials, across the breadth of our shared interests.

Another important pillar of the strong institutional foundation of our strategic partnership has been the Kazakh-UK Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC), a principal platform aimed at providing a senior government-to-government annual dialogue for stronger trade and business engagement. The IGC focuses on five areas of economic activity: oil & gas, mining, health, education and financial services. Since its launch in 2013, there have been seven sittings of the Commission. There are serious grounds to expect an expansion of the focus areas to include agricultural and aero-industrial sectors in the near future, given Kazakhstan's enormous untapped potential in agriculture and the ongoing fruitful cooperation between Kazakhstan's Gharysh Sapary national space centre and British satellite companies.

First President Nazarbayev and UK Prime Minister John Major, London, 21st March 1994.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron on a historical first state visit to Kazakhstan, July 2013.

The two countries' mutual commitment to advance greater economic cooperation and sustainable growth has resulted in very strong trade and economic ties. The United Kingdom remains firmly in the top ten largest trade partners of Kazakhstan in terms of trade turnover. As one of the six largest foreign direct investors in Kazakhstan, UK investment in Kazakhstan has totalled more than $13 billion over the past 13 years, with companies like Shell and Wood Group playing a leading role in the development of the country's energy and infrastructure sectors.

And this is not surprising. Over the years, UK enterprises have benefitted from doing business in Kazakhstan, which is a gateway to an integrated single market of 176 million people spanning across both Europe and Asia. According to the Index of Economic Freedom, Kazakhstan today is the 34th freest economy in the world and is ranked 8th among 40 countries in the Asia–Pacific region. Indeed, the overall score of economic freedom of this economic behemoth of Central Asia is above the regional and world averages.

While UK's current major exports are in the fields of oil and gas, education, financial and business services, healthcare and medical equipment, architecture and design services, and mining, there will be an even wider range of opportunities for British companies as the Kazakh economy diversifies.

A significant boost to the country's rule of law and protection of foreign investors came about with the creation in 2017 of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), with its associated court and arbitration centre operating under English common law. As Lord Woolf rightly points out in his contribution to this book, the AIFC court, independent of the Kazakh legal system and staffed by former senior and eminent British judges, represents the qualities that the commercial world easily recognises.

The AIFC is underpinned by an ambitious objective to become a financial hub on a par with Dubai's IFC and is positioning itself to ensure about 1% growth in the carbonless GDP of Kazakhstan. Viewed in this way and apart from clear economic opportunities for the UK financial sector in Kazakhstan,

this vision in no small measure hinges on the United Kingdom's strengths and expertise in the "green" area. Having reduced its emissions by 29% in the past decade, the United Kingdom – a country decarbonising its economy faster than any other G20 country – is and will remain an important partner for Kazakhstan in its efforts to ensure clean and carbon-neutral economic development.

It was not surprising to me that Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pledged to reach carbon neutrality by 2060 at the Climate Ambition Summit co-convened by the United Nations, the United Kingdom and France on 12 December 2020. To reach the goal, Kazakhstan will develop and adopt an ambitious long-term development strategy to lower emissions and decarbonise its economy, and it has already adopted a new environmental code.

Town partnerships and interregional cooperation between our countries have also been extremely conducive to further strengthening of economic, cultural and people-to-people ties. The 'twinned' Kazakh and British cities include Aberdeen in Scotland and Atyrau on the Caspian Sea shore; Mangystau region and the

First President Nazarbayev and his daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva meet Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace, November 2015.

First President Nazarbayev speaks at Kazakhstan-UK Intergovernmental Commission, November 2015.

Hull & Humber region; In the future, I see a lot of potential in twinning Leeds and Almaty; Cardiff and Almaty, and with towns and cities in Northern Ireland.

Remarkably effective has been the institution of Kazakhstan's Honorary Consuls in the United Kingdom, who have played an important role in promoting and broadening our strategic partnership. Ambassador Douglas Townsend serves as Kazakhstan's Honorary Consul in Cardiff, Alan Spence is in Hull & Humber, and William Young is in Scotland.

In the relationship that Britain has with Kazakhstan, nothing is off the agenda. We talk about the full range of subjects, including our countries' commitments to democratic principles and human rights. The United Kingdom has been one of the staunch supporters of Kazakhstan's positive democratic development. Since Kazakhstan's independence, the United Kingdom has implemented numerous projects, including through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's dedicated fund supporting human rights and democracy. I firmly believe that those programmes, paid for by British taxpayers, have made a difference

in Kazakh people's lives, helping build the capacity of the Kazakh government and the country's civil society to promote and protect human rights.

In 2019, we witnessed the leadership transition – an important moment of change for Kazakhstan, which was closely watched around the world, including in the United Kingdom. The resignation of the nation's Founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev was a momentous event in the history of Kazakhstan and Central Asia. His central role in the establishment of the country and the development of its sovereignty and economy is greater than he would ever claim and has been globally acknowledged. Watching this happen as chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kazakhstan I was delighted to see how smoothly the transition was carried out.

Since then and among more recent and much welcome developments have been the actions by President Tokayev to revamp and liberalise legislation on political parties, elections, freedom of assembly and speech. As an active member of the Council of Europe and its respective bodies, including the Parliamentary

Erlan Idrissov and Boris Johnson, when both were foreign ministers, meeting in London, October 2016.

Roman Vassilenko, Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister, and Chris Pincher MP, UK Minister of State for Europe and the Americas, London, 24th October 2019.

Assembly, the United Kingdom supported Kazakhstan's application to join the Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) and welcomed its full membership in 2020.

Kazakhstan has also made significant progress in strengthening the role of its legislative branch. Several changes were put in place before Kazakhstan's Founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down, aimed at gradually redistributing power from the executive branch to the Parliament. Hence a higher degree of recognition of the added value of parliamentary diplomacy, which has specific advantages in comparison with executive diplomacy. The January 2020 election of a new Parliament in Kazakhstan, which saw an increase of political party representation, has also provided an opportunity to further develop bilateral ties between the legislative branches of the two countries.

Indeed, while diplomats largely drive our nations' foreign policy, we, elected members of national parliaments, also play a crucial role in influencing policy priorities, holding governments accountable, and providing a firmer democratic foundation to the advancement of peace, security and cooperation across the globe. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kazakhstan, which I chair, has consistently worked to encourage inter-parliamentary dialogue with our Kazakh counterparts, foster exchanges of views and advance our shared interests on the international stage.

And without any exaggeration, there are plenty. Take, for example, our successful cooperation during Kazakhstan's stint at the UN Security Council in 2017-2018 – Central Asia's first-ever country to be elected to serve as this body's non-permanent member. Two highlights worthy to commend are Kazakhstan's work on promoting regional partnership between Afghanistan and Central Asia, and its success in organising the first visit since 2010 of a Security Council delegation to Kabul.

Beyond the country's well-deserved membership of the UN Security Council, Kazakhstan has also demonstrated its long-standing commitment to international peace and security by deploying peacekeeping troops in Lebanon. As an ex-military officer and a previous UN Commander in Bosnia, I am proud to note that UK's close partnership with Kazakhstan played a role in readying its troops for peacekeeping, by providing them with English language training and through the Steppe Eagle annual peacekeeping training exercise.

As the largest economy in the region, Kazakhstan clearly understands its share of responsibility. 2020 saw an official launch of the Kazakhstan Agency for International Development – KazAID. Its main geographic focus lies in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Without any doubt, over the past 30 years, Kazakhstan has consistently strengthened its position in the international arena as a peace-loving and open-minded nation and UK's reliable partner in global and regional affairs. Its foreign policy is multi-vector, pragmatic and proactive, and the country views itself as a middle power making its significant contribution to global and regional security, cooperation, and development.

A staunch proponent of multilateralism, Kazakhstan has always shared the United Kingdom's aspiration to forge the international community's collective vision and effective approaches to solving global and regional problems. Over the past decade, this young nation has transformed into a trusted mediator in the world's most dangerous conflicts.

As a country that has prospered from giving up nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan set a clear example to all governments around the globe of the benefits of being nuclear weapons free.

This issue – the threat of nuclear proliferation – has brought the UK and Kazakhstan even closer in our efforts to defend our commonly-held rules and to protect our shared security interests. This year's 30th anniversary of the closure of the infamous Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, where some 456 nuclear tests were carried out over a span of some 40 years, is a timely reminder why nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament have been the pillars of Kazakh foreign policy. I am pleased to note that the United Kingdom has consistently supported the UN resolution on the rehabilitation of the Semipalatinsk region.

Fabled for its unique model of inter-ethnic tolerance, Kazakhstan founded in 2003 and convenes the triennial Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions – a platform for dialogue between religious and political leaders for the sake of global peace and cooperation. The United Kingdom has been a trustworthy proponent of the Congress, and the Church of England has regularly participated in its workings. The Right Reverend Dr Jo Bailey Wells serves as a representative of the Church of England in the Congress secretariat.

The United Kingdom and Kazakhstan have long been natural partners in education. 2021 marked the 27th anniversary of the 1994 Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Education, Science and Culture between Kazakhstan and the UK, which mandated the British Council to be the UK's principal agent in the implementation of the agreement.

Back then, we were smart to understand that this was a brilliant way of ensuring strong links between the United Kingdom and Kazakhstan in the years to come. Today there is a myriad of institutional links. The Kazakh-British Technical University, which this year marked the 20th anniversary since its founding, has partnerships with the London School of Economics, the University of London, University of Southampton; the University of Cambridge partners with the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools while Coventry University, Loughborough University and many others are also active in Kazakhstan.


Akhmetzhan Yessimov, Chairman of Samruk Kazyna National Welfare Fund, speaking in London, October 2019.

The UK's top universities have long been welcoming recipients of the prestigious Bolashak scholarship programme, so it comes as no surprise that every year more visas are issued to Kazakhstan's students than those from Australia or Brazil.

The UK's departure from the EU means the United Kingdom must redefine its place in the world, especially on foreign and trade policy. It also provides an excellent opportunity to craft a new approach for the UK to strengthen economic and strategic ties in this pivotal region. As London and Nur-Sultan conclude the new Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, there is definite optimism and enthusiasm between both countries.

This milestone of the 30 years of this nation's independent and quite successful statehood offers a great opportunity for the UK to reaffirm its long-held respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan. But this is not enough: against the backdrop of a shifting geo-political landscape and our "Global Britain" ambitions, Kazakhstan presents a strong case for the UK to pursue a smart regional approach. After all, Kazakhstan wants and can play a bigger role in the region and the world, not just as an emerging market but an emerging power. The United Kingdom is wise to support Kazakhstan in its noble endeavour for the benefit of international peace and cooperation.

I will end by stating my strong belief that this 21st Century will see Kazakhstan become a world leading nation and on which many other states will seek to emulate. Kazakhstan has a great future.

*Colonel The Rt Hon. Bob Stewart DSO MP is Chair of the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kazakhstan.*

1. View from the Qazaq Eli Monument to the Pyramid of Peace and Reconciliation. *Photo credit: Shutterstock.*

Chapter 11

# Nur-Sultan – Supranationalism through myth and architecture

FRANK ALBO

As a melting pot of global culture for thousands of years, Kazakhstan houses the collective memories and traditions of the world. Though this country gave the world apples and first domesticated horses, and, according to some, even inspired the legend of King Arthur,[1] Kazakhstan remains in the West a veritable *terra incognita*, a derisive toponym for Borat, and its capital city, Nur-Sultan, a rabbit hole of speculation and conspiracy theory.[2] Most of the literature on Nur-Sultan has focused on the motivations of the first president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and has only offered rudimentary assessments of the capital's visual elements and design.[3] Some scholars have argued that Nur-Sultan is little more than a staged veneer fabricated by political elites.[4] This contribution will depart from these trends and looks at the capital through the lens of myth and architecture. Behind the glistening façade of Nur-Sultan's most cherished buildings is an underlying narrative that touches upon the entirety of human achievement and beckons us along a peaceful path toward a sustainable modern world.[5]

Never in the history of modern Central Asia has city planning played such a defining role in the ascent of a nation or its rise to global power. Nur-Sultan is the third in a line of post-Soviet capitals to receive a comprehensive architectural facelift, but neither Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan nor Baku in Azerbaijan have blossomed to the same degree. What is unique about Nur-Sultan is that its urban programme reflects mythopoetic conceptions of design that run through the whole course of human history, from the paradise gardens at Pasargadae to Walt Disney's unrealised concept for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT).[6] The appearance of the capital taps into a universalising aesthetic language, which reinforces the durability of the state and endows the city with a providential character.

For Lawrence Vale, political regimes build capital complexes to serve "supranational interests rather than to advance national identity."[7] In Nur-Sultan, the opposite is true as its building programmes catalyze national identity through the promotion of a supranational agenda. Far too often, the quest for ethnic identity has resulted in tragic confrontations, such as those in the former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland. In an age dominated by the fear of contagious diseases, trade conflicts, and environmental catastrophe, Nur-Sultan offers a prescriptive urban salve through which architecture and city planning are not ancillary to the state, but rather the instruments of a global message that seeks to fundamentally change our world. The built environment in Nur-Sultan is more than just a mere product of glitzy Post-Modernist buildings – it is a type of architectural text with subliminal semantic meanings (Fig. 1).

In weaving together themes of fantasy, myth, and urbanism, the architecture of Nur-Sultan illustrates the unique combination of domestic politics and epic storytelling. Since the dawn of civilisation, architecture has been manipulated in the service of political agendas, and behind every twisting street or eccentric skyscraper lies a repository of hidden cultural meaning. The architecture of Nur-Sultan inspires a common sense of belonging through symbolic reinterpretations of ancient fables and invented traditions about nationhood and ethnocultural unity. The first president Nursultan Nazarbayev devised a full-scale architectural mythography that Leon Yacher has poignantly described as a "Megadream, Megacity, Megadestiny."[8] Nur-Sultan provided Nazarbayev with the perfect *mise en scène* for a new pan-national epic that uses heroic architecture to chronicle Kazakhstan's triumph over Soviet despotism in fulfilment of a perceived global destiny.

## Nazarbayev the Architect

In an act of Promethean audacity, Nazarbayev constructed an ideal city that would serve as a microcosm of the entire country. His efforts brought together the endeavours of Peter the Great at St Petersburg with the romantic patriotism of the Brothers Grimm, who used fables to cement a unified sense of nationhood and inherited notions of cultural patrimony.[9] From his earliest age, Nazarbayev was fascinated with Kazakh folktales. He attended Kazakh plays, recited Kazakh poems, and held Kazakh art, painting, and traditional

craftsmanship in the highest esteem.[10] In marrying Kazakh lore to a utopian metropolis, Nazarbayev continued the legacy of the traditional Kazakh oral epics of Koblandy Batyr, Alpamys Batyr, Kambar Batyr, and Er Targyn. It is not so much that Nazarbayev was trying to create a universalist Shangri-La as he was striving to elevate Kazakhstan as an indispensable participant in world affairs. He recognised that the lure of legends rested in their ability to reify abstract concepts and that more than any other medium, architecture had the power to transform ambiguous public feelings into concrete national ideals.

No other founding father has been more committed to architecture as a vehicle for civic solidarity and identity formation. Not even Thomas Jefferson – a great architect and champion of architectural principles – had written a work of architectural theory. But Nazarbayev did. In his book, *The Heart of Eurasia* (2010), he explored the philosophy of city planning and offered insights into such disparate capitals as Ankara, Canberra, Oslo, Karachi, New Delhi, Yamoussoukro, Lagos, Madrid, Alexandria, and the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh.[11] Like Jefferson before him, Nazarbayev devised the plan of his capital, and, also like Jefferson, he envisioned his efforts as a commemoration of national sovereignty. For both men, architecture was a preserver of historical legacy and the most lasting emblem of liberty and independence.[12]

Nazarbayev developed his own brand of providentialism by contriving a cityscape that apotheosises themes of unity, peacebuilding, and sustainable progress. His vision of the capital can be traced to two distinct sources: Alexandre Le Maître's *La Métropolitée* (1682) which offered a pioneering examination of the circulation of power in an ideal capital city; and Michel Foucault, who observed that a capital should be a wayshower of moral order.[13]

Though he had no formal training, Nazarbayev assisted in the design of many buildings in Nur-Sultan, applying his deft hand to concept drawings, diagrams, and drafts, as well as working closely with "starchitects" Kisho Kurokawa, Norman Foster, Adrian Smith, and Manfredi Nicoletti (Fig. 2). Nazarbayev also provided the ideal platform for the emergence of a vanguard of local Kazakh starchitects, such as Tolegen Abilda, to develop a body of work on the international stage.[14] Providing clear statements on the appearance and symbolic content of Nur-Sultan, Nazarbayev believed in purely Le Maîtrean terms that his capital would consolidate state sovereignty and nationalism

2. Central Concert Hall. Architects: Studio Nicoletti Associati. *Photo credit: Shutterstock.*

while opening up opportunities for international commerce and exchange. The development of Nur-Sultan amounted to an extensive process of de-Sovietisation through urban design. The aim was more than just the creation of a national capital; it was the creation of a new national identity that was devised, crafted, and brought into being by Nazarbayev.

To advance his goal, Nazarbayev appealed to symbolic tales of nomadic life and parables of Kazakh independence. Even the name of the national currency, the *tenge*, was itself a throwback to Kazakhstan's medieval heritage when clan groups used *tanga* coins for barter and interregional trade. When he decided to move the capital from Almaty in 1998, Kazakhstan was then languishing under rising unemployment, crumbling education, industrial inefficiency, and a beleaguered healthcare system. The formation of a new Kazakh identity connected with the former capital Almaty was for Nazarbayev inconceivable given its many deep-rooted associations with Soviet Communism.[15] Although a cosmopolitan centre of creativity and culture, Almaty could not provide a "blank canvas" to imprint a new national consciousness.[16]

When Kisho Kurokawa drew up the master plan of Nur-Sultan, he astutely noted: "the best hieroglyph is produced when it is drawn on a clean sheet of paper."[17] This statement underscores one of the most remarkable aspects of the new capital – the wholesale utilisation of monumental architecture on

a barren *tabula rasa*. As Nazarbayev recalled in 2006: "I put everything at stake, including my career and my name…It was a huge risk, and I took it intuitively."[18] The *Kommersant* newspaper accused the first president of hubris, while his colleagues claimed he was suffering from delusions of grandeur.[19] They could not have been more wrong. Today, Nur-Sultan is the best-known symbol of the emerging Central Asian market, the centrepiece of Kazakhstan's official nation-building revolution, and the prime geographical location for global intercommunication.

## Sary Arqa and Eurasianism

Mythic ancestry, historical continuity, and ethnic perennialism are essential elements of the built works in Nur-Sultan. Nazarbayev invoked these sentiments when he inaugurated the capital of Kazakhstan on November 8, 1997, declaring that the city would "become the focus for our national spiritual richness, sanctity, and tradition."[20] Following his decree, the president performed an *Alastau*, a Nomadic fire-purification ritual mentioned in the histories of Genghis Khan. The ceremony culminated in a processional walk along a white carpet between two flames – the same kind used to elevate Khans to their positions of power. A theatrical re-enactment of this ritual has become a mainstay of the opening ceremony of the Capital City Day celebrations every 6 July. Here, the first president receives the authority to move the capital from a characterisation of Ablai Khan, the visionary leader who sought to maintain the independence of the Kazakh Khanate against encroachments from the Russian Empire, the Qing Empire, and the Kokand Khanate.[21]

In 1998, the same year Nazarbayev issued a tender for developing a master plan for Nur-Sultan, the archaeologist Kemal Akishev made a startling discovery. He stumbled upon ruins at Bozok Lake, a mere five kilometres from the new capital, that showed settlement habitation stretching back to the eighth century CE.[22] Akishev's extraordinary archaeological find was a revelation, as he appeared to have uncovered the political centre of Sary Arqa, a site of enduring national pride that played a significant role in the development of nomadic civilisation and culture in Kazakhstan. Long associated with Kazakh heroism, ancestry, and independence, Sary Arqa was also a political toponym synonymous with the birth of Kazakh statehood and identity.[23] The relocation

of the capital to a region noted for its correlation with the primordial qualities of tradition, nature, and place appealed to Nazarbayev's poetic imagination.[24] For the first president, the rediscovery of this promised land of national heritage was not arbitrary but connected to Kazakhstan's fundamental existence, identity, and destiny.[25] As Nazarbayev once affirmed, Nur-Sultan has "an important sacred and even mystical dimension."[26]

Nur-Sultan is foremost a steppe city, a place of ever-shifting identities, uses, and names. In its first incarnation under Russian colonisation, the Kazakh capital was a Cossack trading post called Akmolinsk; its name changed to Tselinograd in 1961, when it became the principal city in Khrushchev's mass grain cultivation experiment. It remained this way until 1992 when it returned to its original name Akmola, or "white tomb," which in Kazakh culture suggests a shrine or a place of worship.[27] In 1998, the city became Astana, and then in 2019, it assumed the title of Nur-Sultan in recognition of the *pater patriae* of the Republic of Kazakhstan.[28] This chronology corresponds with three historical stages that shaped the urbanisation of Nur-Sultan – Russian colonisation, Soviet exploitation, and post-Soviet re-emergence – with each leaving its distinct mark on the architecture of the Kazakh capital.

The architecture of Nur-Sultan complements Nazarbayev's credo of Eurasianism – the view that Kazakhstan is a bridge between Europe and Asia and a vital member of a broad civilisational state.[29] The policy of the first president was rooted in the theories of ethnogenesis advocated by the Soviet Orientalist, Lev Gumilyov. His notion of "enlightened nationalism" derived from his socio-biological concept of *superethnos* in which Russian, Slavic, Turkic, and Eurasian peoples are like-minded members of the same common ethnic family.[30] Since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, Nazarbayev insisted on conceptualising Kazakhstan's rebirth within the context of a unified historical territory and fate. His romanticisation of early Kazakh culture became a new paradigm for the Kazakh virtues of political liberty, social responsibility, and multicultural peace.

Eurasian architecture provides a visible reflection of Kazakhstan's cultural inclusivity and global progressiveness. As an aesthetic style, it blends Post-Modernism, Central Asian art, Islamic decoration, and the architectural revivalism of Classicism, Orientalism, and Russian Baroque (Fig. 3). Revivalist architecture

has long been a tool of national unification. In the Italian Renaissance, Classical revivalism conveyed the symmetrical proportions of absolute beauty and the perfect state. In nineteenth-century France, Germany, and England, Gothic revivalism was an expression of national sentiment and religious primacy. In twentiethcentury America, the Beaux-Arts style reflected the authority and permanence of the ideal Republic. Nur-Sultan's revivalist architecture has an altogether different complexion as it acts as a transmitter of an all-inclusive national identity nourished by the cultural wealth of the world community.

Eurasianism is best expressed in the storybook fantasy buildings of Nur-Sultan. These range from the Islamic-inspired Ministry of Agriculture and the pagoda-shaped Beijing Palace Soluxe Hotel to the row of themed restaurants along Turan Avenue designed to mimic a Russian townhouse; a Roman villa;

3. Classical colonnade with the Hazrat Sultan Mosque and the Shabyt Palace of Arts in the background. *Photo credit: Aibek Akhanov.*

and a Ukrainian windmill. Even the so-called "Golden Man," the most enduring record of Kazakhstani statehood, is thoroughly integrated into the visual culture of Nur-Sultan.[31] Several variations of the Golden Man's attire are essential elements of the city's design, as seen most notably in the cone-shaped golden towers of the House of Ministries (Fig. 4). Eurasian style is also exemplified in the enormous state-owned oil and gas complex, KazMunaiGas, which soars high above the steppe as a bold symbol of Kazakhstan's petrowealth and a focal point of Nur-Sultan's central axis (Fig. 5).[32] A more subdued statement of Eurasianism is the House of Government building, which closely resembles the marble monument at Ordabasy commemorating the legendary 1726 unification of the three Kazakh Hordes.

4. Golden tower of the House of Ministries and its main plaza. Architects: Shokhan Mataibekov, Zhexen Aynabekov, and Rafik Musabayev. *Photo credit: Ryan Koopmans.*

In Nur-Sultan, the rebirth of Sary Arqa and Eurasian monumentality serve as an art of government and a powerful tool for what Anna Tsing refers to as the "Ethnography of Global Connection," where "image is everything" and "perception is reality."[33] Whether it is a monument to Bogenbay Batyr, the renowned Kazakh warrior who struggled against the Djungars, or a sculpture of Kenesary Khan, who led a bloody resistance against Russian colonisation in the mid-nineteenth century, Nur-Sultan is carefully composed of buildings that serve as mnemonic devices for Kazakhstan's providence and independence. They celebrate national heroism while also communicating cultural memories that connect the past with the present and provide a new framework for a shared global community.[34]

5. City centre at night with the semicircular KazMunaiGas building towering above the steppe.
*Photo credit: Gavin Hellier.*

## The Master Plan

In 1998, Kisho Kurokawa, one of Japan's leading architects, won the international competition to design Nur-Sultan. His master plan produced a new kind of built environment that reflected the plurality of life. Kurokawa's refrain from imposing an artificial form on the capital resonated with Nazarbayev's advocacy of national heritage and local history. Nazarbayev stipulated that the capital should embody a future dedicated to the gradual termination of fossil fuels and the massive expansion of renewable resources. Kurokawa did not disappoint, and his urban philosophy proved well-matched with the government's ideological vision for the capital.

Kurokawa amalgamated the existing old Soviet town of Akmola on the right bank of the Ishim River into a completely new administrative capital. Dubbed "the Left Bank" in homage to the historic Rive Gauche of Paris, Nur-Sultan's centre of gravity serpentines along the Ishim's artificially widened banks – a Kazakh equivalent to the Thames in London and the Neva in St Petersburg. Nur-Sultan scenically merges the old (Russian) and new (Kazakh) sectors into a single unity and provides a symbiosis between tradition and modernity, the fabricated and the natural (Fig. 6). Kurokawa did not replace the existing infrastructure. Instead, he integrated Soviet industrial heritage into the aspirations of a newly independent nation, a synergic construct of water, history, growth, and urbanity.

Kurokawa was a leading proponent of Metabolism, a Japanese architectural movement that proposed urban utopias modelled after the biological, reproductive, and transformative aspects of nature.[35] Kurokawa wanted the new capital to "be a symbol of Kazakhstan's resurrection and the rebirth of an authentic Kazakh spirituality."[36] This was to be achieved through his concept of symbiosis, which he described as "living together" and forging relationships that are "not only advantageous, but necessary."[37] For Kurokawa, symbiosis represented "the philosophy of the nomads of the new age," referring to the characteristics of contemporary society determined by movement, exchange, discovery, pluralism, and heterogeneity.[38] His approach to architecture heralded the city as a living organism in cohabitation with the natural environment.[39] City plans should, therefore, be integrated with the surrounding ecosystem and complement every existing element and diverse community of organisms,

6. Nur-Sultan's administrative centre at night, as seen from the Left Bank. *Photo credit: Aibek Akhanov.*

from fauna and sources of water, to forests, street life, and the cohesion of neighbourhoods.

Nur-Sultan deviated from other planned federal capitals, which did not allow for unpredictable development. Costa and Niemeyer's master plan of Brasília imposed top-down formalism, unable to adapt to the necessities of dynamic growth. While Nur-Sultan drew from ancient archetypes and nomadic flexibility, Brasília celebrated functional rationalism and architectural uniformity.[40] Similar surface comparisons have also been drawn with Dubai. But unlike the mecca of architectural ostentation in the United Arab Emirates, Nur-Sultan offers an exuberant urban space set within the context of real historical legitimacy. Though it appears that Nur-Sultan and Dubai have developed along parallel lines – incentivising foreign investment and exhibiting the work of starchitects – these urban parities are merely superficial. Nur-Sultan springs from an authentic past, and its architecture represents a culture that embraces adaptability and inclusion while acknowledging the dark reminders of Soviet hegemony and ethnic oppression. The cynical view that Nur-Sultan provides an architectural lesson in state-sponsored propaganda belies the deeper message of the capital's role as a global leader in sustainable urbanism, smart growth, and livability.

## Decoding the Nur-Sultan Style

The architecture of Nur-Sultan allows us to peer into the politics of modern mythmaking. If we examine the capital's urban design, we can see how architectural symbolism operates as a critical agent in forming national identity. Umberto Eco provides the framework for precisely this type of architectural decipherment. For the celebrated Italian semiotician, architecture offers a primary utilitarian function and a secondary symbolic function. He divides these modes of communication into "denotative" and "connotative" markers of meaning.[41] A Gothic window's *denotative* use of light serves to illuminate a dark cathedral nave. But when the light passes through the images on the stained glass, the same light becomes *connotative* of the symbolic qualities of divine illumination.[42] In Nur-Sultan, we find a similar cross-pollination of denotative and connotative bearers of meaning. The intentional messages chosen by the state are denotative of independent nationhood, but the connotative messages portray a mythologised view of Kazakhstan as a centre of stability, adaptability, and security in the world.[43]

A close examination of the built environment offers a captivating view into a nation's psyche. In Nur-Sultan, the *shangïraq* – the circular opening at the top of a yurt – serves as a metonym of Kazakh independence into which the support staves are inserted.[44] The *shangïraq* symbolises values shared by the entire community of Kazakh peoples. It also functions as an index of homeland, generational reproduction, and the unity of different ethnicities under one roof.[45] As a decorative motif, the *shangïraq* is an important national symbol, appearing on everything from banknotes and the national flag to the official state seal, street art, and the entire cylindrical frame of the School Children's Palace. Its most dramatic display takes form in the Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre, which doubles as both a giant yurt and a retail space for reimagining Kazakh ethnicity (Fig. 7).[46] Designed by the prominent British architect Norman Foster, Khan Shatyr is meant to rouse national memory and instil a sense of traditional heritage alongside shared concepts of community and modernity. But more than just a shrine to consumerism, Khan Shatyr mall offers a reminder of the coded psychological truths that find symbolic expression in the architectural mythography of Nur-Sultan.

No monument, however, expresses a tidy or independently agreed-upon meaning. Each is fundamentally multivalent and susceptible to many elucidations. This is particularly evident in the several unexpected sobriquets

that have been applied to Nur-Sultan's most iconic buildings: the Astana Tower is also known as "the Banana Building"; the Ministry of Agriculture has been nicknamed "the Syringe"; the Ministry of Finance is better known as "the Dollar Sign"; the Northern Lights mixed office and residential building is called "the Dancing Drunkard"; the Transport Tower has been dubbed "the Cigarette Lighter" and is positioned appropriately near "the Ashtray," or the KazMunaiGas building. The National Archives building is known as "the Egg," the Central Concert Hall has been christened "the Cabbage," and the most prominent landmark – Bayterek Tower – goes by the alias of "the Big Chupa Chups," in reference to a popular brand of Spanish lollipops. These references

7. Entrance to Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre in blue luminous glow at night.
*Photo credit: Nigel Young/Foster + Partners.*

show that, while national symbols can be built and imposed, their meanings are not necessarily bound to a single authoritative interpretation.[47]

The Bayterek is a compulsory destination for all visitors to Nur-Sultan. Nazarbayev drew up the first designs as an architectural embodiment of an ancient myth about the Tree of Life (Fig. 8). According to Kazakh legend, every year, the Samruk (a mythical bird) lays a golden egg (the sun) in the crown of a poplar tree, which is then devoured by an evil serpent. One day, a warrior intercedes and kills the snake, saving the Samruk's sacred egg, who in return rescues the brave hero from his relegation to the underworld.[48]

The Tree of Life has been present in the mythological art of the steppe nomads since the fourth century BCE. Both an emblem of their ceremonial practices and an extension of their social hierarchy, it was "a basic symbol around which the Indo-European model of the world was built."[49] The white base of Bayterek represents the tree, the golden orb represents the egg, and

8. Bayterek Tower at dusk as the centrepiece of the national boulevard of Kazakhstan.
*Photo credit: Evgeny Tkachenko.*

the steel latticework represents the branches that reach up to the sky. Just as the Statue of Liberty symbolises the universal message of freedom and the Reichstag showcases the unified image of Germany, Bayterek emblemises modern Kazakhstan, mixing the prowess of the Eiffel Tower with a Kazakh folktale about the unity of humankind. The philosopher Roland Barthes once observed that urban symbols attract meaning in the same way "a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts."[50] True to this observation, Bayterek serves as a lightning rod for Nazarbayev's mythologisation of the urban steppe.[51]

The symbolism of the Samruk further extends to the Presidential Park situated along the central urban axis between the Akorda Palace and Independence Square. Nazarbayev requested that the Samruk frame the entire park, creating an ideological link between Kazakh mythopoesis and Kazakhstani identity formation (Fig. 9). In Nur-Sultan, myth becomes elevated to a national archetype that reflects the ideals of a regenerated republic. The observation

9. Nur-Sultan Presidential Park. Architects: Alexandr Khvan, Takashi Tsubokura, and Alexander Gerasimovich (Frame Art LLP). *Photo credit: Vladimir Trofimchuk.*

10. Visitors match palms with President Nazarbayev's handprint, Bayterek Tower.
*Photo credit: Gerd Ludwig/National Geographic Creative.*

deck of Bayterek provides a breath-taking view of the young metropolis and features a mould of Nazarbayev's right handprint set within a triangular gold ingot (Fig. 10). More than this, Bayterek communicates a sense of collective patronage in consort with a long Central Asian tradition of recognising that the destiny of the leader is the destiny of the nation.

## The Masonic Myth

For Stephen Baehr, the proliferation of Freemasonry in Russian society was a critical aspect of a propagandistic "Paradise Myth" that percolated throughout Russian literature and culture. This mega-myth served as a powerful ideological tool in portraying Russia as a paradisiacal Eden and the Tsar as a divine mediator in the restoration of the world. This golden age of social order has striking parallels to Nazarbayev and Nur-Sultan.[52] While the mysterious brotherhood influenced the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of eighteenth-century Russia, Freemasonry as an institution appears to have had no direct impact on the architectural development of Astana.[53] But this has not deterred an armada of Internet sleuths from concluding that Nur-Sultan is the new command centre of global Freemasonry. The only merit to these claims is that many of its daring buildings carry the legacy of Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux,

two visionary architects of the eighteenth-century who were at the heart of Freemasonry's engagement with public architecture.[54] Amid the revolutionary fervour of the Ancien Régime, Boullée and Ledoux appealed to the mysticism of Freemasonry and the Masonic promise that architecture could lead to social harmony and the amelioration of the world.[55]

The Pyramid of Nur-Sultan is the linchpin of misinformed opinion (Fig. 11). Dedicated to the promotion of peace and human equality, the construction of the Pyramid is best understood within the context of Western architectural epistemology. Enlightenment, clarity, and homogeneity are the chief aspects of the Pyramid's design, but so is the simple, austere monumental purism of Étienne-Louis Boullée. The Pyramid's caliginous hollow core extends to the very apex of the structure, where it is transformed into a sublime image of visual illumination.

11. Front entrance of the Pyramid of Peace and Reconciliation. Architects: Foster + Partners, 2006.
*Photo credit: Nigel Young/Foster + Partners.*

Designed by Norman Foster, the Pyramid embodies Boullée's philosophy of architecture, in which geometric solids are "symbols of a transcendent order, representing ethical, aesthetic, and religious values, revealing the pre-established harmony between man and the world."[56]

For both Foster and Boullée, the symbol of the Pyramid was synonymous with divinity, and beauty was represented through fundamental principles of mathematical truth.

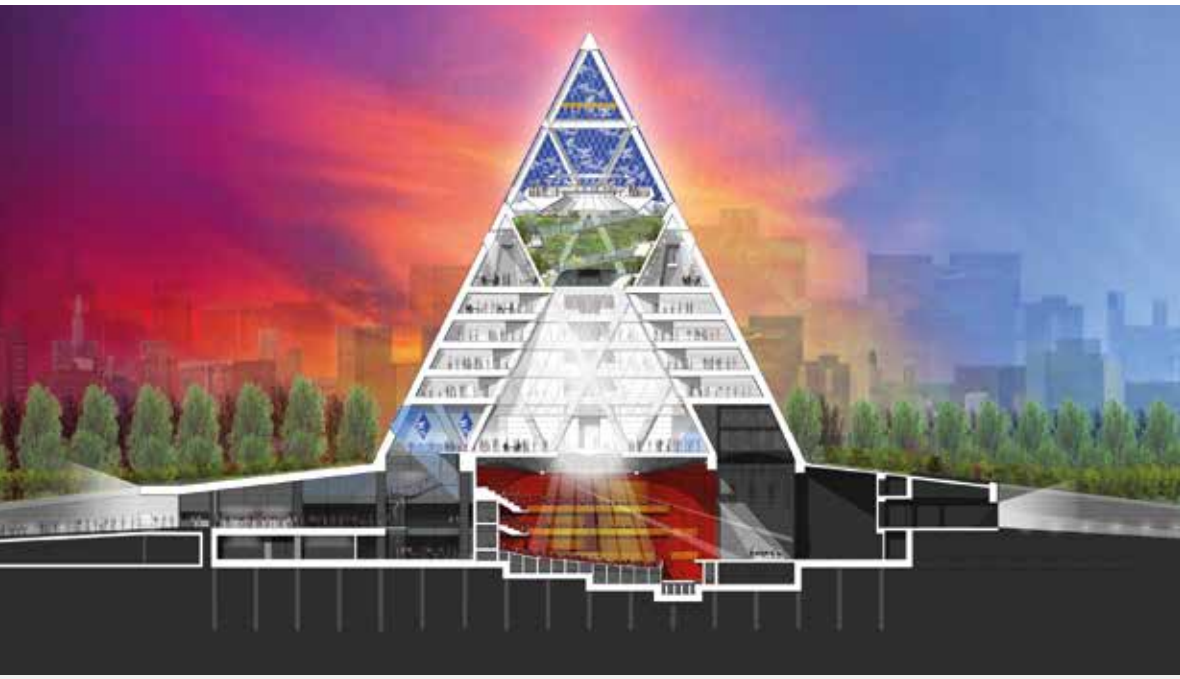
A non-denominational structure, the Pyramid is a modern cathedral of world faith and Kazakhstan's architectural response to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. It forms the visual terminus of the urban mall, being situated on a small hill in impressive isolation and brilliantly framed along the central axis by two key monuments – the Kazakh Eli and Khan Shatyr. Conceived as a civic talisman by Nazarbayev, the Pyramid was built to be the permanent home of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, an international forum founded to promote tolerance and understanding. To achieve this end, the Pyramid was designed according to the proportional mysticism of the "divine proportion," or Golden Section (a value of 1.618), measuring 61.8 metres along each side of the base and 61.8 metres in height.[57] Since its discovery by Euclid, the Golden Section – also known as the Golden Ratio or the symbol Φ – has been associated with magical properties, the music of Mozart, the flight of birds, the spiral shape of galaxies, and the proportions of the human body.

Nothing is alienating about the homogeneity of this project, nor is anything notably Kazakh or distinctly cultural. Nazarbayev chose the pyramidal form as an ecumenical signifier of the "universal truth" of all religious faiths.[58] A tripartite procession marks the journey through the Pyramid from darkness to light. Foster modelled this after the shared religious view that the "below" equates Hell, the "middle" represents Earth, and the "above" signifies Heaven (Fig. 12). A literary prototype for this scheme was detailed in Abbé Jean Terrasson's influential novel, *Life of Sethos* (1731), which recalls the initiation of the eponymous Egyptian prince into the mysteries of Isis beneath the Great Pyramid. Although a work of fiction, *Life of Sethos* had an enormous influence on eighteenth-century Masonic ritual and was often cited as the authority on ancient Egyptian religion.[59] Even Mozart and Schikaneder's Masonic Singspiel,

*The Magic Flute* (1791), drew from the adventures of Sethos, whose trials by Fire (below), Water (middle), and Air (above) were replicated by Sarastro's trials of initiation in the Temples of Nature, Reason, and Wisdom.[60]

## Speaking Architecture

To preserve a balance between the primacy of reason and the search for truth beyond rational understanding, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux introduced a concept called *architecture parlante* (or speaking architecture), which was rooted in his belief that buildings could "speak" their function. By utilising forms and elements that expressed each building's character, Ledoux endeavoured to capture the true essence of architecture.[61] Speaking architecture resonates throughout the architecture of Nur-Sultan. This is exemplified by the Saryarka Republican Velodrome, which unambiguously communicates its function by its shape – a massive racing helmet. Ledoux's pyramidal Woodcutter's House, cubic Temple of All Virtue (*Panaréthéon*), and spherical House of the Agricultural Guards echo



12. Elevation and schematic rendering of the Pyramid of Peace and Reconciliation.
*Photo credit: Nigel Young/Foster + Partners.*

the triangle, circle, and square silhouetted by Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre, the Palace of Independence, and the Nazarbayev Center. Ledoux even prefigured Bayterek and the Pyramid of Peace with his peculiar social institutions – the Temple of Memory (*Temple de la mémoire*) and the Palace of Reconciliation (*Pacifère*) – both dedicated to universal fraternity and the happiness of humankind.[62]

Ledoux's poetic style has a distinct imprint on the architecture in Nur-Sultan. In many respects, Ledoux and Nazarbayev are part of the same architectural revolution and employ the same agencies of social change. Ledoux's plan for the Theatre of Besançon (1784) was reflected through the "All-Seeing Eye" of the Supreme Being, a pervasive symbol in the iconography of Freemasonry and a centrepiece in the skyline of Nur-Sultan. Norman Foster's Nazarbayev Centre epitomises Ledoux's stereometric designs in the form of a modern All-Seeing Eye that peers into the blue sky of the great steppe (Fig. 13). Aimed at strengthening national patriotism and civic identity, the Nazarbayev Centre is the complete summation of the country's pan-national mythos and its commitment to global peace, inter-ethnic harmony, and sustainable development.

On the surface, Nur-Sultan seems to embody ostentation, national megalomania, and even Masonic symbolism; however, behind this gilded veil is an urban narrative of substance, meaning, and power. Like the threads that make up a Persian rug, the cultural achievements of many nations are woven into Kazakh history, forming a rich tapestry of crafts, traditions, technologies, and values. In Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan's rich cultural heritage unites with the sovereignty of Washington, D.C., the scale of Moscow, the bling of Dubai, and the decorative arts of the Far East (Fig. 14). Due in large part to its nomadic past, Nur-Sultan embodies an ancient tradition of adaptability and openness, which makes it an ideal model of multiculturalism and global ecology. While aspects of fantasy urbanism are clearly imbued in the capital, so are the ingredients of mythic wonder, making Nur-Sultan an unforgettable theatre of memory in which history, imagination, and reality occupy the same stage.

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13. Nazarbayev Centre. Architects: Foster + Partners, 2013. *Photo credit: Nigel Young/Foster + Partners.*

14. Nur-Sultan cityscape showing a medley of architectural styles. P*hoto credit: Txema Magdalena.*

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## *Endnotes*

1. Littleton and Malcor (2013).
2. The terms "Nur-Sultan" + "Freemasonry" or "Nur-Sultan" + 'Illuminati' produces over 1.3 million results on Google.
3. Aitken (2009 and 2012), Cummings (2005 and 2009), Herfort (2013), Meuser (2015), Pohl (2012), Talamini (2011), Wright (2008), Yacher (2011), and Zabirova (2002).
4. Fauve (2015: 1), Murphy (2006), and Schatz (2009). On the political motivations of Nur-Sultan see Surucu (2002), Koch (2010, 2012, 2015), Kopbayeva (2013) Köppen (2013), and Laszczkowski (2013).
5. On the "foundation myth" encoded into the architecture of Astana, see Albo (2017).
6. Albo (2017: 170-78). On paradisiacal architecture in general, see Manuel (1973) and McClung (1983). On Walt Disney's utopian approach to city planning and EPCOT, see Mannheim (2002).
7. Vale (1992: 346). Victor Buchli explored the materiality of built forms and explains how architecture gives meaning to our lives while also shaping and untangling social relations (2013).
8. Yacher (2011). For Hannigan, Nur-Sultan classifies as a "Fantasy City," where "solipsistic" theme parks, megamalls, and megaplexes assemble around technologies of simulation and spectacle (1998: 2-4).
9. For a detailed study of St Petersburg's wider historical significance, see Bater (1976). On the Brothers Grimm and German fairy tale nationalism, see Lee (2010: 27-50).
10. Aitken (2009: 14, 20, and 26).
11. Nazarbayev (2010: 41, 44-50, 53-4).
12. On Thomas Jefferson as a self-taught architect and advocate for Palladian Classicism in constructing American society, see Beltramini and Lenzo, eds. (2015).
13. Koch (2012: 123). Le Maître (1682) highlighted three crucial functions of a capital: authority, exchange, and the concentration of national values; whereas for Foucault suggested that a capital must "diffuse throughout the territory all that is necessary to command people with regard to their conduct and ways of doing things" (2007: 14).
14. Meuser (2015: 63).
15. Various official reasons have been used for moving the capital, including the risk of earthquakes and pollution in the region of Almaty. Anacker (2013: 523-6) and Wolfel (2002: 495-8). Nazarbayev provides his own personal and strategic decisions for moving the capital in (2008: 298-305) and (2010: 62-71). For an exploration on the contrasts in national self-identification between Almaty and Nur-Sultan, see Shelekpayev (2013).
16. Mkrtchyan (2013: 233).
17. Nazarbayev (2008: 301).
18. In an interview with the BBC. Antelava (2006).
19. Salopov, "President Nazarbayev's Personal Capital." Kommersant, October 28, 1997.
20. Aitken (2009: 235).
21. Koch (2012: 1).

22. Nazarbayev provides his own account of the discovery in (2010: 105-6.)
23. Kassymov, Kundakbayeva, and Markus (2012: 234).
24. Nazarbayev (2010: 15-6, 111, 234).
25. Ibid. 258.
26. Nazarbayev (2010: 38-9).
27. I am indebted to Saulesh Yessenova for this semantic annotation.
28. The name Astana derives from the same Iranian root that renders the English word "state" and "stand." The "-stan" countries have the same word—as Kazakhstan is the "land of the Kazakhs." The threshold of a yurt was also traditionally called the Astana—likely because that was where one stood to greet another. Analysis provided by Michael Hancock in private correspondence.
29. On Neo-Eurasianism in Kazakhstan, see Laruelle (2008: 171-201).
30. Laruelle (2008: 141) and Titov (2005: 42-89).
31. Dated to the fifth century BCE, the ancient Scythian prince (or princess) was discovered in 1969 in full parade attire comprised of over four thousand individual gold plates. Akishev (1978).
32. There is also a close visual parity with the unbuilt Stalinist project, Narkomtyazhprom (People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry) in Red Square.
33. Tsing (2005), and Bissenova (2013: 127).
34. On the collective memory of cities experienced by citizens, see Boyer (1994).
35. Kurokawa (1977). On Metabolism and urban utopianism in modern Japan, see Lin (2010).
36. Köppen (2013: 597).
37. Symbiosis emerged from traditional Japanese philosophy and Edo architecture, which is typified by hybridity, abstraction, and synthesis. See Kurokawa (1994).
38. Kurokawa (1994: 75).
39. On Kurokawa's indebtedness to Patrick Geddes, the Scottish biologist and forefather of modern urban planning, who was the first to recognise the city as an organic entity, see Albo (2017: 187). On Geddes as a social evolutionist and city planner, see Meller (1993).
40. For an ethnography of Brasília and a powerful critique of the utopian premises of its design, see Holston (1989). On the failed attempts of imperialistic state planning and the imposition of administrative order on nature and society, see Scott (1998).
41. Eco (1979: 84-6).
42. Eco (1997: 179-81).
43. Albo (2017: 69-104).
44. Buchli (2007: 54).
45. Buchli (2007: 52-5) for his careful interpretations of the shangïraq as both an index and metonymic exemplar of Kazakh identity.
46. Khan Shatyr Mall is also an allusion to the highest point in Kazakhstan—Khan Tengri (6995 metres), the pyramidal peak of the Tien Shan mountain range. The name Khan Tengri approximately translates as "Sky God" or "King of Heaven."
47. On questions of authorship, authority, interpretation, see Barthes (1968: 12-17).
48. For Nazarbayev's own account of the myth and the symbolic meaning of Bayterek, see (2010: 225-31).
49. Gamkrelidze and Vjač̌eslav (1995: 764).
50. Barthes (1997: 166).
51. Bayterek Tower also echoes the aspirations of Ernst Neizvestny's unrealised sculptural project, the "Tree of Life" (1956). The Tree of Life was Neizvestny's visionary solution to the conflict between the individual and the community, so central to the purpose of Bayterek Tower, yet so elusive to Russian society for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

52. Baehr (1991: 90-111) emphasises the distinction between the Russian Paradise Myth and its Masonic counterpart in which Freemasons (and not the Tsar) would collectively bring about the restoration of the world. On the role of Freemasonry in the formulation of utopian themes in Russian intellectual thought, see Artemyeva (2009: 63-84).
53. Though Freemasonry never entered Central Asia, Bayer (2007), Smith (1999), Faggionato (2005), and Önnerfors and Collis, eds., (2009) have shown how Masonic lodges played an integral part of an emerging civil society in eighteenth-century Russia.
54. Kaufmann (1952).
55. Ledoux's monumental opus L'Architecture considérée sous le Rapport de l'Art, des Moeurs et de la Législation (1804) and Boullée's Architecture, essai sur l'art (1788), see Rosenau (1953).
56. Pérez-Gómez (1996: 137).
57. Meuser (2015: 128). The "divine proportion" was coined by Fra Luca Pacioli in his book, De Divina Proportione of 1498.
58. Wainwright (2011: 208).
59. Curl (2011: 157-8); and Terrasson (1731).
60. Curl (2011: 246-80).
61. Ledoux [1804] (1983) and Vidler (2006).
62. At his utopian Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans in France, Ledoux grafted Masonic principles onto a grand design for social reform, see Vidler (1987: 101).

Children at a school in Kazakhstan.

Chapter 12

# The teacher and educational change in Kazakhstan: through a sociocultural lens

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## Introduction

Teachers are central to any educational change, for it is they who enact it. They also work in a particular context influenced by multiple factors. A recent analysis of case studies of educational reform concluded that contextual factors are powerful and significant.[1] Teacher's everyday practice and education depends largely on the situation in the classroom that is influenced by the school organisational culture, which, in turn, is determined by the socio-cultural, historical and political context of the society. Therefore, an objective assessment of the activities of a teacher in a particular class requires careful consideration of a specific context in which the schools are located.

Change is not bound by the context and educational change theorists argue that in all educational change there are 'push and pull' factors. The push element is to ensure that high expectations are there; the pull is the creation of intrinsic motivation and the desire to work together for a high moral imperative, plus laying out a clear a path to get there[2]. For change to take place one needs action and reaction to the situation. The action that pushes and a reaction that creates supporting conditions for the change. There is also a need to see change as possible and desirable i.e. to want to meet the challenges. This is what Dweck[3] calls a growth or learning mindset or Vygotsky[4] would describe as pushing beyond the "zone of proximal development". More recently, the educational change literature has also acknowledged a wider societal change that is pushing transformations and educational change.[5]

In 1931 to 1933 an important investigation was undertaken by two famous psychologists, Luria and Vygotsky with other Russian psychologists. They organised an expedition to Central Asia conducted by Luria and conceived with

Vygotsky[6]. Their purpose was to study the influence of cultural environmental factors on the formation of cognitive processes (acceptance, memory, thinking) among residents of remote villages of Uzbekistan and the mountainous area of Kazakhstan (at that time the area was called Kirgizia).

In the experiment with the village residents, Luria found out that for the participants all objects had functions in a particular situation. For example, one of the participants in the experiment could not comprehend why 'a log' should be categorised with a hammer and a hatchet. When the participant was asked why he thought 'a log' should belong to the categorisation along with "a hammer and a hatchet, he answered: 'A saw, a hammer and a hatchet all have to work together, but the log has to be there, too! ... if we have tools, we still need wood – otherwise, we can't build anything" (p.341).[7]

This shows that people can be restricted by personal experience. Luria argued that the demands of an industrialised society, literacy, and higher orders of thought go hand-in-hand. Under complex educational and economic constraints, people learn to transcend the immediate physical sensory experience. New forms of abstract categorical relationships come to mind.' (ibid). This was a turning point in psychology and Vygotsky concluded 'in another cultural environment [there is] another psychology.'

Vygotsky and Luria were key in helping us to understand the impact of culture on human cognition and were part of 'a worldwide movement in psychology against mindless, mechanistic theory'[8]. In this chapter we too want to acknowledge the importance of the historical and cultural context and we want to apply it to the study of teachers changing educational practice in modern Kazakhstan.

## Change in Education in Kazakhstan

After independence in 1991 Kazakhstan set about developing its school system. There were two distinct periods of change, 1991 – 2010 and 2010 to the present day. Both of the authors of this chapter were involved in the later modernisation process and so we focus on 2010-2021. The aim of the change was to modernise the education system while retaining the best of past traditions, including the Soviet. The cultural dynamics were complicated, for as part of independence Kazakhstan wanted to rebuild the Kazakh language and culture, preserve the

strong elements of the Soviet system and equip its citizens for a more globalised world. There was also the desire to build a strong knowledge-based economy. These aims resulted in a deep-seated change involving a trilingual language policy; a reshaped curriculum and accompanying development of pedagogy, based on a constructivist view of learning; criteria-based assessment and 12 years of schooling. This was a highly ambitious agenda and for teachers a very complex one, something we explore later on in this chapter.

## The socio-cultural and historical context

What was the socio-cultural and historical context in which the Kazakhstani education system was developing? Historically Kazakhstan, as with many other countries in Central Asia, has been associated with nomadic peoples inhabiting its vast expanses and the Great Silk Road. Due to the nomadic way of life and non-use of writing, for many centuries education was based on oral creativity and rich folklore. The memory of battles and fights; historical decisions; principles of interaction within clans and families; the rules for resolving civil disputes and inheritance; of the way of life and upbringing, was passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. It was a place where people, goods and ideas crossed from different parts of the Eurasian continent – Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia. These conditions gave rise to the multilingualism.

The peoples of Central Asia were noticeably different from the Arabs and the Chinese in that they were polyglots, aware of new ideas and trends, knew the culture and traditions of neighbouring countries whose caravan routes passed through the territory of Central Asia. Traders carried religious teachings with them, so Central Asia became a place for the intersection of various beliefs. Ethnic and religious tolerance has been a characteristic feature of the peoples of Kazakhstan for millennia.

The development of education in Central Asia, of which Kazakhstan is a part, began its countdown with the 'Age of Enlightenment' of the 8th-12th centuries. Starr outlined the period of prosperity of the states of this region. According to Starr (2008[9], 2013[10]) in the 10th century, the path of enlightenment in Europe began with the steppes of Central Asia, which was lost with the Mongolian invasion between the 13th and 14th century. In the 12-century, the

Otyrar library in Kazakhstan had the second largest volume of book deposits after Alexandria, all unfortunately destroyed by Genghis Khan[11].

By the 18th Century Central Asia was in the sphere of influence of several dominant states: China looming from the East; the Russian Empire from the North; Britain, which conquered India and most countries in Southeast Asia and moved further to influence Iran. In 1731, as a result of the weakened state of the Kazakh Khanate caused by an exhausting war with Dzhunghars, the Kazakhs' Junior Horde (*Zhuz*) swore allegiance to the Russian Empire, thus the incorporation of Kazakhstan into Russia began. For more than 150 years before its independence Kazakhstan was treated as the outskirts of the Russian Empire, even as it was increasingly subject to rule from St Petersburg. Then from 1918 it was under Soviet control. Thus, for more than 200 years Kazakhstan had few liberal traditions and not much free and critical thinking was allowed. There are naturally disputes around the history of Kazakhstan, its borders and heritage, especially today, when the postcolonial discourse has been added to the traditional discourses of the pre-Islamic and Islamic, Mongolian and Turkic periods in an attempt to assess the Soviet past of the region.

## Abai and Education

Abai Kunanbayev, a well-known Kazakh philosopher and the founder of written Kazakh literature, who lived in the second half of the XIX century, longed for Kazakh children to learn what other people knew so as to become their equals. He wanted education to be a shield and a pillar for his people. The opportunity to educate children was limited to Russian schools that accepted mainly children of the Kazakh nobility, or in the Islamic *madrasahs*. In Russian schools, students studied Russian and Tatar languages, geography, arithmetic, Muslim doctrine, and learnt how to write official letters in the Russian and Tatar languages. The curriculum of the *madrasah* included grammar, arithmetic, Arabic philology, religious law and philosophy, and the basics of medical science.

Abai himself had home schooling with the mullah and later continued his education in the *madrasah*, where he learnt Arabic and Persian. At the same time, he attended Russian school and by the end of five years of study he began to write poetry. From the age of 13, under the instruction of his father, Abai

started to learn how to act as the head of the clan. At the age of 28 he departed from the clan governance and engaged completely in self-education. One of the reasons for his decision was disappointment in his efforts to transform people's thinking about the benefits of education for children. "The wealthy people would send their children to Russian schools just so they can use their children's literacy as a proof of their own superiority when quarrelling with their kinsfolk," he wrote (*Word Twenty Five*)[12]. Abai put his deep disappointment in his book of *Words of Wisdom* and his poetry, all of which have survived to this day:

> Well, I have decided at length: henceforth, pen and paper shall be my only solace, and I shall set down my thoughts. Should anyone find something useful here, let him copy it down or memorise it. And if no-one has any need of my words, they will remain with me anyway. And now I have no other concern than that. *(The Word One[13])*

The formation of Abai's worldview was influenced by poets and scientists of the East who adhered to humanistic ideas[14], as well as by the Russian classics and through them European literature in general. He also communicated with political exiles including E. P. Michaelis, N. Dolgopolov and S. Gross. He translated Krylov, Lermontov, Pushkin, Goethe and Byron into Kazakh. Abai himself had a learning mindset and pushed his 'zone of proximal development' beyond the possibility of the time and context. While Abai condemned the fixed mentality of the tribesman which he thought restricted them from seeing opportunities beyond the immediate future, he also admitted that many of his countrymen could not think of education because their stomach was empty and they were busy thinking about how to feed the family:

> It would be good if Kazakh children could get an education. To begin with, it would be enough to teach them Turkic letters. Yet such is our irreligious land that before we send our children to school, we have to acquire wealth; besides, they ought to learn the Persian and the Arabic languages. But can those who are hungry keep a clear mind, care about honour and show diligence in learning? Poverty and quarrels within

> tribes and families breed thievery, violence and greed. If you have livestock, your belly will be full. A craving for knowledge and a craft will come next. Then people will start thinking about getting an education and teaching their children at least something *(The Word Twenty-Five)*.[15]

What is evident is the impact of the socio-cultural, historical and political factors on the formation of a peoples' cognitive processes. Abai was, with a few others, ahead of his time in thinking about the transformation, when most of society was not ready to accept the need for such a change. Nevertheless, Abai did not stop criticising the tribal structure of Kazakh society and was a supporter of its modernisation according to the European model, which we could describe as a 'push strategy for change' at that time. Although, in his time, Abai could not create the enabling conditions for the transformation he longed for his country, his *Words of Wisdom* had a great influence on the leaders of the Alash-Orda movement and the emerging Kazakh national intelligentsia of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, Abai became a spiritual leader of the revival of the Kazakh nation and still is.

The Alash-Orda movement came into existence right after the 1917 revolution and created the Alash Autonomy-Kazakh Independent state that existed until 1920. During Alash rule, it formed a special educational commission, which developed a Kazakh alphabet based on a Latin script. A century later modern Kazakhstan commemorates the legacy of the Alash Orda intelligentsia and their visions of Kazakhstan. It is seen as particularly important in current times when the Kazakh state is rebuilding its national identity while preserving its commitment to modernisation[16]. In 2017, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan signed a decree 'On the translation of the Kazakh alphabet from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin script'. This will have a huge impact on schooling and the education system in Kazakhstan.

In 1920 the Kirgiz (Kazakh) Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was formed, and Kazakhstan remained under Soviet communist rule until 1991. The merit of the Soviet government lay in its creation of a unified system of mass education, which played a large and positive role in the modernisation of Kazakh society and the development economy. First of all, it contributed to the transition from the feudal economic model and nomadic society towards the

modern industrial economy and urbanisation. It is impossible to consider the Soviet education system in isolation from the planned economy. If the education system itself was advanced and brought progress and modernisation to Kazakh society, then the methods by which the planned economy was introduced and the transition from nomadic methods of economic management to the planned administrative economy cannot be considered positive. The Soviet managers who came to power did not want to understand the philosophy of life and development of the people and they began to promote a collectivisation model without any adaptation to the distinctiveness of the lifestyle of the population. This transition brought the Kazakh people hardships and disasters such as starvation, repression, destruction of their cultural heritage and unique national identity. So, mass education was at a huge cost.

## The modernisation of education post 1991

In 1991 a priority for the newly independent Kazakh state and its leaders was also the reform or modernisation of education, in which they invested heavily. First attempts were less than successful[17] and then in 2008 a well thought-through model was employed. The model for change was the building of two experimental, autonomous organisations that would spearhead new models of educational practice and transfer learning to the whole system. The organisations were the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and Nazarbayev University, both of which aimed to become international standard, national and regional level leading institutions. Another key element was collaboration and partnership with international organisations. These partnerships were long lasting and represented partners from most continents in the world. Some have argued this was international policy borrowing writ large[18] but the general consensus is that the picture is more complex than this.

There were core ideas about essential elements of practice at the centre of the reform work. These were research informed and have since been viewed as essential elements of educational change. They are the following:

- That the development of teachers is an essential element of successful change. In a study of educational change McLaughlin (1987) observed that "change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit. At each point

in the policy process, a policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it." (p.174). This shifts attention away from institutions and their priorities to "individuals and individual incentives, beliefs, and capacity" (p.174)[19]. The key actor in transforming teaching and learning is the teacher so therefore teacher development is an inescapable part of reform.

- That teachers should collaborate[20] and work together, with the current iteration of this being in the concept of professional learning communities[21]. Many studies of teaching have shown the isolation of the teacher and therefore, the impermeability to change in many cases.

- Reflection. Much research has shown the necessity and value of teachers reflecting systematically on their practice. The core ideas are captured here in the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. 'The gap between aspiration and teaching is a real and frustrating one. The gap can only be closed by adopting a research and development approach to one's own teaching, whether alone or in a group of cooperating teachers.'[22] For Stenhouse, the essence of teacher research and teacher development is "sustained critical enquiry" into your own teaching.

- Autonomy. Clearly, if teachers are to be encouraged to make informed professional decisions, that necessitates some autonomy. There is a great deal of research on this topic but in general we know that teacher autonomy is often less than in other professions; that it is related to job satisfaction, motivation, retention; as well as professional decision making.[23]

These core themes have run through the developments of the last decade in various ways and our intention here is to focus on one recent project to illustrate how these themes play out in practice and how they reveal the cultural historical threads. The example we have chosen is the use of action research in schools.

## The Action Research Project

The overall aim of the action research project is to equip teachers with the confidence to collaborate in professional learning that takes them beyond personal reflection, reliance on outside 'experts' and leads them to learn from each other by sharing and developing in-school expertise and practice. The first round of the project was implemented in seven Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools between 2012 -2015: the second round of the project is under implementation with 13 comprehensive schools of Nur-Sultan city. This latter project, called SHARE (School Hubs for Action Research in Education) is about building networks and collaborations in and between schools to employ action research as a way of engaging with school improvement. Other similar initiatives which emphasise the elements identified above are also underway e.g. Research Lesson Study or a programme of Teacher Leadership. All of these projects share certain elements e.g. collaboration between teachers, the use of research processes and teacher development. All are engaged in developing new practices with teachers at their core.

## Socio cultural aspects

How do some of the cultural-historical elements interact with these aims? In our attempt to explore and engage with the issues in developing a new practice, we use our knowledge and understanding of the sociocultural aspects of Kazakhstan: one of us is an insider and the other an outsider researcher in the context. We will illustrate how the deep-seated beliefs in a context and the ways of viewing the world show themselves in ways that cannot always be anticipated. We do this by drawing on Facebook discussions of teachers engaged in the early days of the SHARE programme and a doctoral study.

The first concept is around the role of the group, the individual, difference and collaboration. The Kazakh saying '*Bölíngendí börí žeidí*' was used by one of the teachers to explain their understanding of collaboration in action research[24]. If the saying had been used in the historical context of a Kazakh nomad's life, it would have been translated as: 'He who splits from the tribe will be eaten by a wolf'. A saying like this would not be just good advice for the members of a tribe but also a warning. The use of this saying by the teachers in a Soviet school context could be translated as: 'he who separates himself

from the collective will be eaten by a wolf', that is 'teachers in the school should not compete or clash with one another because all of them cooperate in the building of socialism'. Thus, it leaves little room for questioning and disagreement, leading to groupthinking and an absence of criticality.

The saying can have opposing meanings, both positive and negative. The positive meaning can be 'a school collective supports its members in learning and coping with problems as long as one stays loyal to it'. The negative one, on the other hand, 'staying loyal to a school makes one keep the trash in-house' and it becomes an injunction not to discuss problems and issues but rather hide them from the outside world. Action research is premised on the idea of problem solving.

A similar example surrounds a debate around a photo used in a training session. Figure 1 is the photo used.

Figure 1: The Sunflower phenomenon – group thinking vs critical thinking.

The debate that follows shows the two teachers engaging with their cultural beliefs.

> **Teacher C:** 'I called it the phenomenon of sunflower. At the local SHARE session, a simple picture of the field of sunflower was shown, that had an explosive effect on teachers' subconscious. Looking at this picture we all agreed that it is not good to separate yourself from the collective. We all thought this was normal, until we were given another perspective on the picture, that is to think critically and not to be part of the group thinking. So, welcome to the SHARE project, colleagues, to improve the practice of teaching and learning, to improve the quality of life, to develop thinking, and most importantly to form a critical view of the changes around you!' (Facebook post).

> **Teacher D:** 'Looking at a sunflower that looks in a different direction than the others, I also thought 'it is wrong, why is it separated from the team?' I would call it colonial thinking. From today on my thinking has changed, now I say 'it is better to look at each phenomenon differently, and find different solutions.' I will call it critical thinking.'

Research on teacher professional development[25] has shown that these experiences of dissonance are important and necessary for deep learning to occur. These conversations also show the deep cultural conceptions that the teachers had to engage with in order to explore the concepts and practices of action research. There were key discussions on accountability, linked to notions of authority and responsibility. These are complex practices and often made teachers fearful of taking responsibility and being the sunflower facing the other way. Albeit they had a growing desire to do so and a forming rationale for doing so.

> **Teacher F:** 'During the SHARE session we discussed a lot about school culture. We were asked to give an example when we avoided responsibility by putting the responsibility on someone else. For example, I remembered, when my students ask me to let them have one day free of school uniform,

my answer was that the school administration wouldn't permit it. I now understand that I didn't take any trouble to try to discuss it with the school administration and provide students with a proper answer. I always put the responsibility on the school administration's shoulder…'

Another example. 'School professional development trainings are held on Saturdays. Colleagues say, 'Why don't you ask to hold the CPD on working days? Instead of explaining that the CPD is not effective when you have lessons to conduct, I responded that the administration said so, the director said so.'

These examples show how restrained we can be as teachers. This is how culture is formed. If I continue to answer like this, it means that I will contribute to the establishment of a culture of avoiding responsibility at school. At first glance, things don't seem to matter to us, but we are part of this big system. Let's learn to give a logical answer, not an easy one. A small step is a big impact.'

Many of the attitudes being discussed here were influenced by notions of compliance and hierarchy which were embedded in past practices in Kazakhstan. The teachers were wrestling with notions of autonomy,

**Teacher B:** 'Friends, did you think about the fact that we often do not get satisfaction from teaching? I think the reason why we don't get satisfaction is because we are simply do our work automatically as a machine. Sometimes we need to stop and think and reflect.'

Another teacher takes up this debate and argues for reflection and professionalism.

**Teacher A:** 'A teacher can improve the quality of teaching only if he/she has a deep understanding of his experience. If a teacher does not research and learn to solve complex problems, he/she will not be able to make a big difference in his practice…'

**Teacher B:** 'Nowadays, obtaining the status of 'a teacher-master, 'a teacher-researcher' imposes a great responsibility on teachers. In order to qualify for such a status, it is important to study continuously, conduct research systematically and to collaborate with others to learn.'

**Teacher C:** 'I completely agree with you. All the characteristics of a teacher-researcher, a teacher-master coincide with the competencies of a professional teacher.'

The teachers are engaging with the essential practices of the educational modernisation programme outlined earlier in this chapter, but they are also demonstrating what Luria, Vygotsky and Abai were discussing: moving beyond a fixed mindset. Here are two teachers reflecting on the increase in motivation and responsibility they have experienced:

**Teacher A:** 'Each webinar is a new step, a new insight, new information. I notice an increase in the internal motivation to learn something new. I come to every meeting of the project, be it offline or online, with the position 'I know nothing' …'

**Teacher D:** 'After the local session, I decided to set the task to myself to learn to think, to think strategically. At the session we discuss how to plan strategically. What should be the daily, medium and long-term goals and steps to achieve the mission in the end? Discussed these and other issues.'

And finally, a teacher shows the physical and psychological nature of taking different viewpoints and reflection on practice.

'I served as a moderator, played a role of an observer and was a participant. The session was very lively, and I gained a lot of experience, because we held the same session three times with different participants, each session had a different function. I had three different views, three different thoughts in these three different positions.

As an observer, I observed the work of the School during the session. I tried to record what I saw and heard…As a moderator, I was nervous. Because the audience was not my students, they were qualified professionals. As a moderator, I noticed some shortcomings, I needed to work. I understood, from this position of a moderator the session is perceived completely differently. Because when you are an observer, you can see the pros and cons of the audience, and when you are a moderator, it is very difficult to see it, as if the audience understands and knows everything.

School classroom in Almaty.

As a participant, you feel as if you are attending the session for the first time, even if the session is repeated for the second time. You don't know what to say, you're your thoughts are different, you perceive differently.

During the observation, I realised that I should not think about what advice and recommendations I should give to the teacher-moderator, but how I would act if I were this teacher-moderator? Because even if everything looks great to the teacher-moderator, it looks different for the observer.

> As a teacher, I realised the importance of reflection after the lesson by putting yourself in the position of a student and reconstructing the lesson. Because when I teach a lesson everything seems clear to my students, but if I were a student and if a teacher like me conducted same lesson, would I like this lesson? Could I understand my own lesson on my own?'

Our intention in sharing these teacher reflections is to show the challenges that the teachers face in reconsidering their stance as educators and how these are connected to the socio-cultural aspects and history of Kazakhstan. It is like looking through a complex prism. The past brought many educational benefits, as well as challenges, and there is a strong desire to move forward taking the best cultural and educational aspects, but also to change the restricting aspects that writers cited here have commented on. The voices of these teachers show how disturbing, satisfying and important this is. We write at a time of great change in the world and we end with two helpful comments (reported to be) by Peter Drucker which remind us as to why we need to heed these considerations. The first is to remind us that "culture eats strategy for breakfast" and the second that "the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulences: it is to act with yesterday's logic."

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The kitap.kz platform offers books and audiobooks in Kazakh.

Chapter 13

# Advancement and promotion of the Kazakh language in the modern age

RAUAN KENZHEKHANULY

'Language is the soul of a nation' is a phrase often repeated but rarely given careful consideration. Our mother tongue is indeed the cornerstone of our country's Independence and an ultimate expression of our national identity. The history, literature and culture of the Kazakh people that stretch back for thousands of years are accumulated and preserved through and in the Kazakh language and thus the preservation of our language amounts to the preservation of our history, culture, and statehood.

Efforts to advance and promote the language, to strengthen it and boost its modern content have been continuing since the proclamation of Kazakh as the state language in 1995. As language is a living organism, its relevance is determined by modern, sought-after content available in that language. Therefore, each of our projects is directly or indirectly related to the development of modern content in Kazakh.

Perhaps it is natural that I came to be one of the earnest champions of my native language. I am not a linguist by training, but this is my passion, passed on to me from my parents: my father is a literary critic and folklorist, my mother is a teacher of Kazakh at a university. Growing up, we often discussed the prospects of our language; there were always interesting guests at home, friends of my parents – also scholars who could contribute to this topic with interesting viewpoints.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, our generation, then high school students, witnessed the process of building an independent state. We were 14-15-year-olds when the Kazakh national anthem was introduced and our national currency, the *tenge*, first came into existence. These are some of the brightest events of our adolescence. We are the first generation of Kazakhs who

studied the Constitution of Kazakhstan: first in 1993, then in 1995, we learned by heart how many articles were there, what they were about. And all this, it is clear, deeply affected us.

The stricture to 'adapt or die' demands an uncompromising response to the fast-changing realities we live in. It is often parroted that the state language must be promoted, but not everyone is ready to act to support the cause. In fact, the modernisation of the language is a shared task for all of us who speak it. We know that the internet has increasingly become a barometer of language use, especially since most of our cognitive activities – reception and transmission of information – have shifted on-screen. Therefore, contributing to the world-wide-web with quality Kazakh language content has become one of our main purposes at the National Bureau of Translations.

To this end, we have initiated a number of large-scale projects: the development of the Kazakh section of Wikipedia, the introduction of the Kazakh


New Humanitarian Knowledge: 100 New Textbooks in the Kazakh Language.

language to Google Translate, setting up www.kitap.kz – the Open Library of Kazakhstan – and www.openU.kz – the Open University of Kazakhstan – as well as translation of TED lectures and textbooks into Kazakh. We have also coordinated projects to translate two anthologies of Kazakh literature into six languages and Abai's works into ten languages to promote Kazakh language content worldwide.

The work of the National Bureau of Translations and its predecessor, the WikiBilim Foundation, began in 2011 with the Kazakhisation of Wikipedia. Why was the development of the Kazakh version of Wikipedia so important? In reality, Wikipedia gives a tangible picture of the modern language map of the world. It is believed that there are about 6,000 languages in the world, more than half of which are predicted to be lost within a century, and many of which are already endangered or dying right now. Less certain is how many of these languages are actually still alive, how many people really use them on a daily basis?

Authored by representatives of the community who speak the language and supported without the involvement of governments, Wikipedia may perhaps provide an answer to this question. In fact, there are 321 different language editions of Wikipedia. Correspondingly, it is reasonable to claim that there are currently 321 truly living languages in the world. How relevant is the Kazakh language in the modern world? Can it compete with others? We searched for the answer to these questions through our Wikipedia project.

The task was not to sit down and write these articles ourselves, but to encourage people to understand that the language depends on every speaker. Our message was simple: 'Will those who speak and write in Kazakh, raise the profile of the Kazakh edition of Wikipedia?' In two years, the number of entries increased from 7,000 to 200,000. Currently, the Kazakh Wikipedia contains about 228,000 pages. About 300 volunteers actively submit and edit articles.


Launch of the 100 New Textbooks project.

Kazakh Wikipedia pages are viewed 13-15 million times per month and rank 43rd in terms of the number of articles. The quality of entries has been of major importance: most of them were uploaded from existing encyclopaedic literature in the Kazakh language. This has contributed, in my view, to the expansion of the encyclopaedic knowledge base in the state language and of its application in general. This is a considerable achievement.

Why is this so important? Because, first of all, this project made more information available online when searching in Kazakh, and secondly, it has been a reflection of the activeness of the community. It has demonstrated not only that the Kazakh language is in use, but also the number of its young promoters is estimated in the thousands. The vast majority of those who submit Wikipedia entries are young people who do so on a non-profit basis. On this basis we can see that there is a generation that will bring our language into the future and that the Kazakh language *has* a future. We live in a fastest-changing communications and technology landscape, and the relevance of any language depends on its adaptability to the information age, which is characterised by the transition from book culture to screen culture. It is therefore immensely important to have content in the state language that meets the modern world's needs. We believe that the Kazakh Wikipedia project is an initiative that substantially contributes to strengthening the digital viability of the language.

This project became the basis for introducing Kazakh into Google Translate. Ultimately, Wikipedia articles entered the Google search engine: as a result, Google quickly mastered the language and in December 2014 added it to its translation system. Of course, it did not happen all by itself. A large number of text-and-audio-files were sourced, edited, and uploaded. We have been working with Google for almost ten years. Thanks to this, in addition to the ability to translate Kazakh into other languages, such popular services as Youtube, Gmail, Google Chrome, Android, etc., have started supporting the language. This is also an impressive result.

In 2017, the Kazakh language was also added to the Voice-to-Text service in Google Translate, a service with more than 200 million users every day. Currently, the system works in 103 languages, including Voice-to-Text in 32 languages. As a result of negotiations between Google and the National Bureau of Translations, the Google Translate team provided comprehensive assistance

to this project. At the beginning of 2021, we announced that the Google Translate system will recognise not only Kazakh text but also Kazakh voice, that is, it will automatically translate a spoken Kazakh word into any of 102 other languages. More than a million people currently use this system monthly. Thanks to the help of sponsor organisations and volunteers, this initiative continues successfully.

No doubt, the presence of the language on such ubiquitous platforms as Wikipedia, Google Translate, Youtube, Gmail, Google Chrome and Android is extremely important, but it is not designed *per se* to manifest all the power of the language, especially its emotional and artistic power. Therefore, we wanted to create a project to promote the language as art. As an expression of the aesthetic heights of the language, masterpieces of fiction also ought to be available online, free of charge. That is why in 2012 we created kitap.kz, a large-scale online platform that provides an opportunity to read and listen to the best works of Kazakh and world literature in Kazakh. Anyone wishing to immerse themselves in the splendour of the language is invited to check out the open library.

To date, kitap.kz has collected more than 10,000 volumes by more than 500 authors. I suppose one could learn the Kazakh language only to read these books. Anyone who becomes thoroughly acquainted with the riches of this library will learn about the Kazakh people, their history and culture as closely as possible, for literature conveys national psychology and contains codes and themes that distinguish one nation from another. Apart from fiction, the open library exhibits other genres of literature, including science and art. In line with a demand for literature in audio format, there are currently more than 500 audiobooks narrated by well-known voiceover artists. The daily number of users is around 10,000-12,000, making kitap.kz the largest and most visited online library in Kazakh to date.

It is well known that the power of language is determined not only by its capacity to encapsulate the rich experiences of the people, but also by its flexibility in the face of the realities of modern life. The easiest way to address the latter appears to be translation. From 2012, the WikiBilim started translating TED Talks and broadcasting them on national TV channels. In 2017, the WikiBilim was rebranded as the National Bureau of Translations and

launched the project *New Humanitarian Knowledge: 100 New Textbooks in the Kazakh Language*. It was one of the directions of the Rukhani Zhangyru (Modernisation of Identity) programme, initiated by the First President, Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Within the framework of this project, the 100 best textbooks in humanities have been translated. The list includes titles in philosophy, sociology, psychology, linguistics, literary studies, art studies, cultural studies, religious studies, film studies, theatre studies, ethics, aesthetics, media, history, management, marketing, micro- and macroeconomics and business, politics, as well as law, intellectual property rights, pedagogy and statistics, ethnography, demography, and public policy. All these are selected from outstanding works that have been translated into dozens of languages before and made a huge contribution to humanitarian knowledge by introducing new concepts and theories, and are included in the curriculum of top universities around the globe.

The translation of these textbooks into the Kazakh language is a necessary step in stimulating higher education and the academic environment in Kazakhstan, and modernising the state language. Each title is published in 10,000 copies and distributed to the libraries of 130 universities throughout Kazakhstan. Electronic versions of the books are available at the Open University of Kazakhstan (www.openU.kz) and Open Library of Kazakhstan (www.kitap.kz). Over 300 professionals, including leading academics, experienced translators and editors, took part in the work of translation and editing.

Besides, online courses in both Kazakh and Russian have been developed based on these translated textbooks, which are available at the Open University of Kazakhstan (www.openU.kz). Academics from the country's top universities took part in putting the courses together. The Open University of Kazakhstan, launched in 2016, has become a platform for online courses co-developed by leading universities and more than 150 professionals in the country. About 200 courses are available free of charge in Kazakh and Russian, with more than 5,000 lectures accompanying them. The duration of each lecture is at least 20 minutes. Why was all this done? We are aware that Kazakhstan is not yet producing content in all areas that can compete with the world. Most of the methods and content on education, science and technologies, even arts, cinema and music come from overseas. And we consume it all, mainly, in a foreign language.

We cannot limit or curb the volume of global content that reaches our borders. But we must be able to receive such content in our native language. This is an invisible struggle, a battle if you like, for Kazakh speakers. The easiest solution would be to learn a foreign language and use already available content. However, history proves that many languages and nations are absorbed, swallowed up, and eventually disappear this way. People often ask 'Why make so much effort to translate into Kazakh and create new terminology when everything is available in English and Russian?'. Why then have state borders, maintain a national currency, and protect the country? If the language is lost, one can bid farewell to the nation. Without a nation, sustaining an independent state becomes unnecessary. Hence, developing quality content in Kazakh compatible with modern life is one of our most important tasks, and translation is its indispensable tool.


Launch of the Anthologies of Contemporary Kazakh Literature, British Library, 25th September 2019.

Through translation, we can not only receive from, but also share with the rest of the world. Essentially, the growth of a nation is measured by what it contributes to mankind. Within the framework of the project *Modern Kazakh Culture in the Global World*, two volumes of contemporary Kazakh literature (poetry and prose) have been translated into six official UN languages. This project was carried out under the umbrella of the programme *Rukhani Zhangyru*, implemented on the initiative of the First President – Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev. The English edition of the anthologies was prepared by Cambridge University Press, the Arabic version by the National Center for Education and Culture of Egypt, the Spanish version by the Cervantes Institute, the Russian version by the Moscow University Press, the Chinese version by the Nations Publishing House in Beijing, the French version by the Cultural Association of Paris.

Meetings between foreign translators and Kazakh authors helped to bring the translations as close as possible to the original and to ensure their artistic quality. With a printrun for each anthology of 10,000 copies, more than 120,000 books were delivered to more than 23,000 libraries, educational institutions and research centres around the world: to 18 countries where English has an official status; 22 countries in the Middle East and Africa where Arabic is spoken; 20 Latin American countries plus Spain; all regions of China; 14 Russian-speaking countries; and 17 Francophone countries in Europe and Africa. It is the first such comprehensive collection of Kazakh literature in these languages distributed on such a scale. The National Bureau of Translations received over 100 letters of gratitude from the recipients, including from President Emmanuel Macron of France and from Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education in the UK. The project was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Large-scale translation work continued in 2020. At the initiative of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and to mark the 175th anniversary of his birth, the works of the great Kazakh poet and thinker Abai were translated into ten languages: English, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Turkish, French and Japanese. The collection includes 145 poems, three long poems and 45 words of edification: a core of Abai's heritage. We are especially proud to be involved in this project since Abai is a moral guide for Kazakhs

and a foundation of our national identity. His works may be relatively small in volume but are profound in content. They have become a spiritual core for every Kazakh. Abai is the best self-image that each of us is introduced to in childhood and strives towards for the rest of our lives. He contributed to the development of the Kazakh language, which thanks to his genius, has become the basis of the nation's self-preservation. Therefore, it was important to present a complete collection of his works to the world.

The work of printing and distributing Abai into English was carried out in partnership with Cambridge University Press and translated by the celebrated British poet Sean O'Brien and the equally brilliant Scottish poet John Burnside. The Visor publishing house, which specialises in literary translation, was in charge of the presentation of the collection in Spanish with the support of the Cervantes Institute. The translation and printing of the collection into French was carried out by Éditions Gallimard, one of the leading publishing houses in France. Italian translation of the collection was prepared by Gruppo


Translation of the works of Kazakh polymath Abai into 10 world languages.

Mondadori, also one of the largest publishers in Italy. Abai was introduced to the Arabic-speaking world by the publishing house of the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO).

For Chinese, the great poet was translated by Akpar Mazhit, a well-known writer, winner of the State Prize of the People's Republic of China. Alles Druckbar publishing house translated the collection into German. Abai was translated into Japanese for the first time and published by Hanadensha Press (株式会社花伝社) in Tokyo. The work on translating Abai's legacy into Turkish was done by the publishing house of the Turkish Literature Foundation. Moscow University Press coordinated the development of a new collection of Abai in Russian.

Within the framework of this project, for the first time, Abai's works were translated directly from Kazakh. It was our modest contribution to the semantic exchange between the Kazakh and other world languages and an experience we are proud of and grateful for.

In conclusion, the advancement of the state language by all available means including translation into and from Kazakh is the main focus of our work. Since 2011, the National Bureau of Translations and its predecessor, the WikiBilim Foundation, has been contributing to the inclusion of the Kazakh language in Google Translate and other online global services. The foundation has translated TED Talks, created the largest online library in the country (kitap.kz), delivered the project *New Humanitarian Knowledge: 100 New Textbooks in the Kazakh Language* and the translation of Kazakh literature anthologies into six and Abai's works into ten languages. Since the relevance of any modern language is measured against realities of modern life, we can call any language "alive" or "powerful" only when there is modern, popular content in it, and the nation is "alive" as long as its language lives. The advancement of the Kazakh language, therefore, is the advancement of our country.

*Rauan Kenzhekhanuly is CEO of the National Bureau of Translations of Kazakhstan.*

Tourists on Lake Kaiyndy, near Almaty.

Chapter 14

# Kazakhstan's tourism potential

JEREMY TREDINNICK

To say Kazakhstan is a land of contrasts is truly an understatement. Diversity is one of the defining words used when describing this Central Asian land, and while geographically and culturally speaking that is undeniable, it can also apply in a historical and sociological sense as well.

Were a modern-day businessman standing beneath the Baiterek Tower in the centre of Nur-Sultan (previously Astana) to be transported back in time to 1992, he would be astonished and bewildered to find himself in the midst of open, grassy steppe looking towards the distant town of Akmola on the far bank of the broad, slow-flowing Ishim River. In contrast, however, were the same thing to happen to a Kazakhstani shepherd on horseback in the foothills of the Altai Mountains, he might turn full circle and see nothing different at all.

Vast areas of this enormous country seem to have barely changed over the last three decades, yet there are also locations – mostly, but not exclusively cities – that are completely unrecognisable in their modern guise when compared to their appearance in the 1990s.

Thirty years ago, as the independent state of Kazakhstan emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union, the thought of developing a successful tourism infrastructure must have been far from the minds of those in power. For President Nazarbayev and his government there were myriad more pressing problems to deal with, from maintaining social stability to developing a working economy.

Tourism, such as it was in the 1990s, involved mostly game-hunting by wealthy individuals from ex-Soviet states – for argali, ibex, snow leopards and bears in the mountains, and wolves, gazelles, kulan and saiga antelopes on the steppe – or the brief cultural wanderings of curious foreign oil industry executives and hardcore Silk Road enthusiasts.

This all changed in the early 2000s, as Nazarbayev's policies provided a platform of social stability and economic growth that was far swifter and more successful than any of Kazakhstan's Central Asian neighbours. A burgeoning free market and fast growth in private business sectors opened the door for the country's great potential as a tourist destination.

It was easy to see how many opportunities there were in a country with such natural diversity, ancient and little-known history, and cultural wealth, but of course the lack of infrastructure, expertise and international service standards in the tourism sector was at first a real impediment to its growth.

To fly into Almaty's airport and find your way into the city could be a trial in itself; hotels were either very expensive Western brands (with five-star claims that were optimistic at best) or were fairly dilapidated Soviet-era affairs – quirky

and novel for the first-time Western visitor, but ultimately unsatisfactory for a stay of any length. Venture beyond a city boundary and into the countryside and a translator/facilitator for even the shortest sojourn was a must.

Slowly but surely, however, and driven as much by the private sector as by government initiatives, Kazakhstan's nascent tourist industry has taken off, helped by an influx of international hotel brands in all the main cities, partnerships between international and local travel companies, and improving levels of English among the younger generations.

It's certainly true that tourism remains an underdeveloped industry here – but that can actually be seen as a benefit for the type of visitor interested in visiting what is a relatively remote destination for much of the world. What Kazakhstan offers is access to a range of awe-inspiring natural wonders

Big Almaty Lake and Tien Shan Mountains in late autumn.

and landscapes; insight into remarkable historical narratives stretching back millennia; and a cultural and traditional experience that blends nomadic hospitality with the modern world.

Any visit to Kazakhstan encompasses all the above – and makes for a truly rewarding trip unlike any other. For those travellers with a head for adventure, there is a wide range of locations – from semi-desert to classic steppe, from skyscraper-strewn cities to alpine vistas – to feed the soul and serve as the backdrop for life-lasting memories.

### Geographical diversity

The heart of Central Asia is the vast expanse historically known as the "Kazakh Steppe" or "Great Steppe", a land of undulating grass as far as the eye can see during the warmer seasons, and frigid ice and snow in the winter months. The majority of Kazakhstan is steppe land, and trips through it involve long journeys in 4WDs or on mostly slow-moving trains.

The steppe can appear to be an empty, uninviting place, but well-planned excursions can bring you to some wonderfully atmospheric spots, despite the long journey to get to them. Whether it's Tamgaly's ancient UNESCO World Heritage petroglyphs or the enormous Singing Sand Dune of Altyn Emel National Park in Zhetysu; the bizarre rock formations and hidden lakes of Bayanaul National Park or the spiritual Abai and Shakarim Monument in

Horses grazing on the Great Steppe.

Petroglyphs at Tamgaly, near Almaty.

Rock formations in the steppe.

Sharyn Canyon, near Almaty.

On the crest of the Singing Barkhan. Altyn Emel nature reserve.

East Kazakhstan – the hours of mesmerising travel past small, rustic villages and endless swathes of feather grass populated by herds of horses and other livestock only add to your sense of wonder and satisfaction on arrival.

Much of the pleasure in exploring Kazakhstan's remote places comes with the understanding that you are far from the world of mass tourism and will often be one of relatively few tourists to visit a given destination that month. Of course, there are some locations that receive greater numbers of both domestic and international visitors, for example the Sharyn Canyon to the east of Almaty, or Burabai Lake to the north of Nur-Sultan. These natural wonders are more popular for good reason, boasting inspirational views and scenic charm – the former is sometimes called Kazakhstan's "Grand Canyon", whilst the latter is known as "Little Switzerland". However, you will rarely, if ever, see crowds of camera-toting tourists – and if you do it is remarkably easy to get away from them and find peace and seclusion.

In the south and southwest of the country, classic steppe turns to desert steppe and semi-desert. Whilst this inhospitable region may sound unappealing, there are some extraordinary experiences to be had here, the most awe-inspiring being along the edge of the Ustyurt Plateau and on the Mangyshlak Peninsula in Western Kazakhstan. To visit the former's incredible chalk escarpments and the latter's underground mosques and mausoleums is a study in rare wilderness landscape and little-known history – hard travel no doubt but reaping rich rewards.

The third major geological feature of this massive country may be the smallest in percentage of its land area, but probably represents the greatest draw for tourists: the mountain regions of the Tien Shan and Altai in the southeast and northeast of the country respectively. Although not widely known globally, these mountain ranges offer exquisite alpine scenery and incredible biodiversity, making them a significant draw for trekkers and nature lovers.

Hiking or horse trekking to the glacial base of holy Mt Byelukha and mysterious Rachmanov Lake, or around Markakol – the "Pearl of the Altai" – is to immerse yourself in nature that's closer to pristine than almost anywhere on Earth. The higher ranges of the Tien Shan in the south are more commonly frequented by tourists, but the magnificence of places like Big Almaty Lake, Turgen Valley, the beautiful Kolsay lakes and the high peaks of the Zailiyskiy

Alatau and Khan Tengri massifs mean the mountain slopes within a day's reach or less from Almaty will always be popular destinations.

The government has taken steps in recent years to increase the numbers of national parks and nature reserves throughout the country, thereby protecting large areas from the damage unchecked tourism can inflict. These protected areas are scattered across Kazakhstan's landscapes, from the deserts of the Ustyurt Plateau and Barsakelmes in the Aral Sea region, to the forested hills and lakes of Bayanaul and Karkaraly in the Kazakh Uplands; from the taiga forests of the West Altai to the saxaul forests of the Ile-Balkhash on the shores of Balkhash Lake; from the classic central steppe of Naurzum to the alpine juniper forests of Aksu-Zhabagly in the far south.

All these evocative destinations can be visited, but in order for the modern-day traveller to do so, it's essential to retain the services of a reputable travel company

Watering horses in the mountains.

that can liaise with the authorities for permits, arrange suitable transportation and accommodation, and provide experienced guides to accompany you. Of course, it's not impossible to do it on your own, but you'd need to be near fluent in Russian and/or Kazakh, and even then, the odds would be stacked against you if you don't have a "facilitator" to iron out any problems.

Speaking from personal experience, having travelled throughout Kazakhstan both on my own and with a variety of travel companies, the extra expense of planning an itinerary with a tour operator results in a much more enriching experience whilst navigating the country, both in terms of comfort and in the historical knowledge and cultural understanding that a good guide will provide.

Once outside the main urban centres, you should be prepared for long hours of travel, sometimes very basic amenities, and the occasional delay whilst various obstacles are surmounted, from vehicle breakdowns to "miscommunication" issues, etc. Patience and a spirit of adventure are valuable assets on tours to remote areas in this beautiful country – and I have almost always found the rewards when you finally reach your destination cause any tiredness or frustration to disappear. It all adds up to memories to treasure.

## Evolving cities

Spending time in Kazakhstan's two main cities is a different matter entirely. In the growing metropolises of Nur-Sultan and Almaty, glass-fronted skyscrapers, shopping malls and coffee shops create a familiar atmosphere and an interesting Kazakh twist on modern urban culture.

Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, its capital until 1997 and often described as the cultural centre of the country, is a genuinely attractive and enjoyable place to visit. Until recently it was the entry point for the majority of tourists, partly because of its capital status and airline network, but also because of its proximity to the wonders of the Tien Shan. Sprawling across the lower slopes of that mountain range's foothills, with broad, tree-lined streets running north-south to benefit from the inflow from cool mountain air, it's a pleasant city to wander around.

In the country's early days of independence, getting around could be tricky – public transport was difficult to get to grips with, and the local method of taking unregistered "taxis" was daunting for foreigners. However, the advent

of an underground Metro line, which cuts right through the main city centre from northeast to southwest and is efficient and cheap, has made Almaty's major landmarks and museums much more accessible. (Plans for an improved LRT network will help even more.)

Additionally, Almaty Bike, the city's automated bike rental system that is similar to London's "Boris bikes", offers a great way of seeing the city during the warmer months (Nur-Sultan and Shymkent also now offer the same bike network). In fact, during warm summer evenings, when restaurants and coffee houses open up their alfresco areas, Almaty almost has a feeling of Vienna or Paris about it. Add wonderful historic landmarks such as the Kok (Green) Bazaar, the beautiful Holy Ascension Cathedral in Panfilov Park, plus the backdrop of snow-covered Tien Shan peaks (on smog-free days) and you have the recipe for a unique Central Asian experience.

Nur-Sultan, or Astana as it was previously named (and is still called by most of its residents), has a different atmosphere, but offers its own set of fascinating highlights. In its nascent period, while then-President Nazarbayev's architectural vision was being constructed, the city had something of a split personality, with the diplomatic area plus a few grandiose and impressive buildings on the left bank of the River Esil (Ishim) and the old Soviet-era city on its right, connected by two long, empty roads.

The new capital struggled with a lack of identity, but over the last decade this has changed, as the full scope of Nazarbayev's vision has been developed, and an increasing population and new generation have stamped their own distinct personality on it. Nur-Sultan is located within the vastness of the Great Steppe, 1,000 kilometres north of the climate-tempering mountains of the south, and its summers and winters are consequently extreme in nature. For the visitor this means late spring through to early autumn is probably the best time to visit – and make no mistake, this relatively young metropolis is well worth a few days' exploration.

Landmarks like the Baiterek Tower, Khan Shatyr and the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation are architectural masterpieces that would stand out in any world city. The fact that they are all part of a huge, elongated quadrangle – Nurzhol Boulevard – that also boasts an Opera House, the Presidential Palace and the National Museum, mean a whole day can easily be spent working your

The modern Almaty Central Mosque (completed in 1999).

The futuristic Atyrau bridge over the Esil River in downtown Nur-Sultan.

way from Khan Shatyr's unique modern shopping mall down to the viewing platform in Baiterek's towering golden sphere, and on to the fascinating stories on show in the nation's pre-eminent historical museum.

Other sites highlight both the old – such as the Saken Seyfullin Museum in a classic Russian wooden house – and the uber-new: on the site of EXPO 2017 stands the massive, multi-storey glass sphere of Nur Alem, the National Pavilion. Nur-Sultan has been compared to Dubai or Hong Kong for its stunning architecture, but located incongruously in the middle of the steppe. It certainly has elements of these cities, but it is much more than that, and deserves


The National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Nur-Sultan.

credit for the speed in which it has come to terms with its many contradictory components and transformed itself into a vibrant central focus for this young but swiftly developing country.

Kazakhstan's many other cities are also changing fast, as the 21st-century world of technology and connectivity encourages economic and social cross-cultural communication and partnerships. Places like Shymkent, Atyrau, Aktobe and Karagandy are all becoming more international and cosmopolitan in their outlook, offering distinct rewards for travellers on their explorations around the country.

Interior of the Hazrat Sultan Mosque in Nur-Sultan.

## Cultural wealth

Of course, a fundamental reason for most tourists' decision to visit a new and unusual destination is the desire to experience and learn about a culture that differs from their own. In this respect Kazakhstan offers a wealth of opportunities of widely differing subject matter.

For those interested in ancient history, there are a plethora of locations that can be visited, from Stone Age, Bronze Age and Turkic-era sites such as the UNESCO-recognised rock valley of Tamgaly, near Almaty, where an amazing array of petroglyphs and graves are found, to the lesser known but equally fascinating Kumai archaeological complex east of Nur-Sultan, or the significant ancient settlement of Botai, near Kokshetau in the northern steppe, where the earliest evidence of man's domestication of horses has been uncovered.

Kazakhstan's rock art can be found from the Karatau mountain range (the Arpauzen site) where the Tien Shan peters out in the far west, all the way east to the Zhungar Alatau (the Eshkiolmes site) in the east. It is also found in significant amounts in Western Kazakhstan in the environs of Aktau and Mangyshlak Peninsula by the Caspian Sea, as well as in remote locations in the central Kazakh Uplands and Ulytau – where the Kazakh nation was officially formed in the 15th century.

Getting to all these places involves hard travel and red tape, but they afford the visitor an opportunity to travel through some of the most traditional parts of the country, connecting not only with its rich past but also with Kazakh traditions that have remained stronger in the countryside than in the cities.

Indeed, to visit Kazakhstan today reveals significantly more traditional Kazakh culture than it did 25-30 years ago, because with independence and freedom from the crushing ideologies of Soviet communism, the country has seen a revitalisation in Kazakh identity and pride in its rich and varied history. You will also see more semi-nomadism today than in decades past; it was frowned upon by the Soviets as "backward" and repressed but is now understood to be intrinsic to the development of human society in the steppe lands and is embraced as such – Kazakhs place a great deal of importance on their connection to the land.

World-class historic sites such as the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum near Shymkent in South Kazakhstan, along with the remnants of major Silk Road

cities such as Otrar and Sauran, are also now being protected and renovated. The Yasawi Mausoleum in particular is an inspirational place – similar to the great architectural facades found in Samarkand to the south, it was built in the same Timurid era by order of Timur himself, and its grand majolica domes and intricate mosaic walls are stunningly beautiful.

There are precious few examples left from Imperial Russian times, but some of the regional cities still retain streets lined with buildings from the 19th century – Atyrau and Semey, for example – whilst Almaty's graceful Holy Ascension Cathedral and Nur-Sultan's Constantine-Elena Church remind one of tsarist Russia's dominion before the advent of the Soviet Union. That period of Kazakhstan's history is represented by grandiose neoclassical buildings in the cities, but in other, more sombre ways in other locations.

Places such as the Alzhir Memorial Museum of Victims of Political Repression and Totalitarianism near Nur-Sultan, and the Dolinka Museum of the Memory of Victims of Political Repression near Karagandy, are sobering

and thought-provoking to visit, but show that it's important that history, both celebratory and as a memorial to atrocities, be remembered in full and learned from. Kazakhstan's cultural and traditional roots extend back far beyond human records, but the country that exists today is the culmination of a wide range of extraordinary historical periods and significant events, both beneficial and disastrous, and understanding that provides context for what is a rich cultural experience.

## Niche tourism

Kazakhstan also caters for a number of niche activities and interests. For those interested in human space exploration, Baikonur Cosmodrome – from where astronauts of many nations have ventured into the celestial unknown – offers package tours to watch rocket launches. Located between Kyzylorda and the Aral Sea in an area that was top secret until recent times, this is space tourism taken to the extreme.

The Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum in Turkistan, Kazakhstan (completed *circa* 1389).

The launch of a Soyuz rocket at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

The Aral Sea attracts tourism of an unusual kind as well. The infamous "Virgin and Idle Lands Project" during Stalin's rule caused the shrinking and virtual destruction of the once beautiful Aral Sea, and the "ships' graveyard" near Aralsk sees a small but steady trickle of visitors.

So, too, does Kurchatov and the "Polygon", the area west of Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) in East Kazakhstan that was used for 40 or more years to test the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. Permission must be given and many forms filled in, but some domestic tour operators can arrange this, and a trip to the town where the scientists lived, and the small museum, followed by a tour of some of the crater sites, is fascinating if sobering.

More lighthearted pursuits include birdwatching and angling, both of which are popular in Kazakhstan. Twitchers head for places like the protected area of Tengiz and the Korgalzhin lakes in the central steppe southwest of Nur-Sultan, where at the crossroads of two major migratory routes you can see more than 300 species, including flamingoes in huge numbers, Dalmatian pelicans and a host of other water birds, demoiselle cranes, ruffs, pratincoles, the sociable

An old abandoned ship on the shore of the drying up Aral Sea.

A Kazakh eagle hunter in traditional costume near Almaty.

lapwing and black lark, not to mention a host of predatory birds from harriers to steppe eagles.

For fishing, the Ili and other rivers that course through the open steppe between the Tien Shan and Balkhash Lake are hugely popular, and downstream in the Ili Delta you can hunt for giant catfish. Up in the Altai there are opportunities galore to fish for trout, grayling, perch, pike and many more species – while in Markakol lake lives the *uskutsh* (a subspecies of Siberian lenok trout), which can grow to eight kilogrammes and is a big draw for anglers.

### Nomadic hospitality

I have left until last what is perhaps the most rewarding part of any trip to a new country: meeting and spending time with its people. The first-time visitor to Kazakhstan will quickly discover that hospitality is almost a commandment in the Land of the Great Steppe. This harks back to ancient times and the nomadic lifestyle, when helping each other survive was a "cultural imperative" in the harsh environment of Central Asia.

Kazakhs may not be effusive in their general bearing, but behind a certain reserved manner lies a genuine willingness to be helpful and welcoming. You will often find yourself invited to dinner or encouraged to join an outdoor picnic or meal (called *dastarkhan*), where toasts are made to friends, family, hosts and guests alike.

I have been invited spontaneously to wedding receptions in Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk) and Almaty; taken to meet village officials in the remote steppe, where from nowhere a full feast materialised, including a whole cooked sheep; and cajoled into joining impromptu family picnics in locations ranging from Kok Zhaylau near Almaty to a mausoleum complex near Turkistan in the south and a leisure area near Aktobe in the north.

Brace yourself for a multitude of questions – and endless toasts with vodka or cognac, if you are willing – and you will have enjoyable and satisfying experiences every time. You will also eat incredibly well, which may come as a surprise. Though meat is perceived as being the mainstay of Kazakh cuisine, there is a host of tasty vegetable, fruit and sweet dishes in the nation's culinary repertoire, as well as delicious bread and noodle options. The fact that Kazakhstan boasts well over a hundred different ethnic groups in its population, all of whom have contributed their own cuisines to the mix, may explain why fantastic eating opportunities are yet another unexpected pleasure of a sojourn in this many-faceted country.

At 30 years old, Kazakhstan is still a relatively new state, finding its way in a modern world filled with complexity. With its breadth of incredible landscapes, wealth of historical and cultural influences, and juxtapositions between the traditional and modern, it offers today's tourist a unique combination of experiences to both choose from and enjoy. To visit Kazakhstan is to go back in time but also see future potential; to understand the value of open minds and open arms; to appreciate both the natural world and man's place in it; and most of all to stimulate the mind and enrich the soul.

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Musicians in national costumes in the Petropavlovsk park of culture and recreation.

Nur-Sultan at night.

Chapter 15

# Conclusion

H.E. ERLAN IDRISSOV

Every year since 1991, on 16 December, Kazakhstan marks the most important day in its history – the adoption of the Constitutional Law on State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which formalised the nation's legal status as a sovereign state. The moment in 1991 was all the more significant as the idea of regaining Independence had been cherished by so many generations of our ancestors.

The preamble to that milestone Law reads:

> *"The Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan, expressing the will of the people of Kazakhstan, recognising the priority of individual rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other universally recognised norms of international law, reaffirming the right of the Kazakh nation to self-determination based on the creation of civil society and the rule of law, carrying out a peaceful foreign policy, declaring its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament process, solemnly proclaims the state independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan,"*

This single sentence encompassed the vision of Kazakhstan's future as an independent state, its key goals and values. This vision outlined the course of action for the country's leadership from the outset and remains its guiding star even today.

How much can a nation accomplish in just 30 years? In such a short period of time, Kazakhstan has attempted to achieve what many others have been pursuing for centuries. In the now distant 1990s, the newly established sovereign state faced a myriad of challenges, both domestically and in the international

arena. The country that emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Empire had to transform its economy, re-build the shattered economic relations inside and out, establish previously non-existent democratic institutions, preserve inter-ethnic and inter-faith harmony and prove itself as a trustworthy and respected partner on the international scene.

Despite all these stupendous challenges, the country embarked on a series of reforms aimed at shifting the country's economy from a centrally planned system to a modern free market model and revamping its one-party government into a multi-party democratic system.

In just 30 years, the nation's gross domestic product has grown 18-fold, creating more than 300,000 jobs and 1,250 new industrial enterprises. The Kazakh economy has already attracted $350 billion (£253 billion) of foreign direct investment, which accounts for 70 percent of the total investment inflow to Central Asia. This is the result of the successful policy of openness and trust, backed by stability and harmony in Kazakh society. The country is widely considered to have the best investment climate in the region, ranking 25th in the World Bank's 2020 Doing Business Report.

Kazakhstan's consistent policy also ensured national unity based on the principle of equal rights for all. The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan – initiated by the First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev – represents the interests of all the ethnicities living in Kazakhstan, thus proving that people of different backgrounds can peacefully coexist within a society.

The Assembly, along with the triennial Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions that has been hosted in Nur-Sultan since 2003, have contributed to the growth of Kazakhstan's image as a peaceful and harmonious society.

Kazakhstan has been excelling in the international arena too, having established diplomatic relations with 183 countries and transformed into a reputable voice on the world stage.

Through implementing a pragmatic multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan has become a recognisable player on the global stage and an undisputed leader in the Central Asian region. The fact that at the dawn of its independence Kazakhstan relinquished the world's fourth biggest nuclear weapons arsenal helped secure the trust of major powers, ensured friendly relations with the

global community and contributed to Kazakhstan's transformation into one of the leaders of the global anti-nuclear movement. The nation also continues forging multilateral cooperation in key international organisations.

Through these examples one can find proof that our nation's policy both domestically and internationally has always been about peace, harmony, coexistence and mutual support. This very aspiration to peace and the trust of the global community were the reason behind Kazakhstan being chosen as a platform for efforts aimed at settling the Syrian crisis. The Astana Process proved to be an effective means of bringing the different parties in the conflict to the negotiating table in order to find common grounds.

It is the trust of the international community that helped Kazakhstan become the first Central Asian state to be elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for 2017-2018. During its tenure in this important international body, Kazakhstan reiterated its commitment to the principles of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, confidence building measures and promoting regional partnership between Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Contributing to the rebuilding of Afghanistan has always been a major priority for Kazakhstan. The country has provided humanitarian and development aid, student scholarships with special focus on young women, as well as training programmes for the police.

There is still so much more that could be examined in a book devoted to the 30 years of development of a modern independent Kazakh state. This book is intended to provide an external perspective to Kazakhstan's achievements with a touch of insider context on some of the internal topics.

We believe that the contributions by our distinguished authors that cover only key areas might ignite further interest in our country among English-speaking readers. We do not of course claim a monopoly on the truth, but the views expressed in this book are unique and are a result of vast experience of working with or in Kazakhstan.

While primarily written to celebrate the achievements of a young nation, this volume also outlines the plethora of tasks that are still there to address. Kazakhstan continues efforts to diversify its economy away from natural resources, while developing a digital ecosystem aimed at improving the

economy's competitiveness and the quality of people's lives. Digitalisation, in turn, will also help put in place a more transparent and inclusive governance, minimising the risks of corruption and maximising the public sector's efficiency.

The National Council of Public Trust established by President Tokayev was born out of the need to include the voices of the unheard into the decision-making process and has become a genuine dialogue platform and reform initiator. This unique mechanism needs further support and attention in order to make the government truly responsive to the people's needs.

But the most important asset for any country, and especially for a young country like ours, is certainly its people. The education and healthcare spheres are in need of further reform and adjustment to the needs of the modern age. Developing and supporting human capital remains the core priority for Kazakhstan's leadership, especially in such challenging times. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated all the drawbacks of our healthcare system and indicated the direction in which our education system needs to develop. We now have an even clearer vision of the direction in which to follow, although the road has become much bumpier.

The pandemic that has taken the whole world aback has surely added to the challenges that lie ahead of us. But we have been through tougher times and, without doubt, will do our best to fight our way through these unprecedented times, together, with a common goal in mind and a strong belief in our bright future.

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THIRTY YEARS AGO, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Kazakhstan achieved its formal independence and immediately set about creating the institutions and economy that would become the basis for future stability and prosperity. The problems facing the new country were daunting, from lack of defined borders, the absence of a genuine polity and the need to dismantle the old state and introduce radical social reforms. Few people could have predicted such a rapid transformation from what had been a neglected and under-developed territory into a stable and prosperous Central Asian nation.

This path to development was not always easy. The first constitution for the new republic, adopted in January 1993, was soon shown to be ineffective and it was not until a new constitution that introduced a strong presidential power was adopted in a popular referendum in August 1995 that the country was able to make progress in state building. The concentration of power into the presidency was vital in these early years to enable progress to be made. Later, as the country found its stride, these powers were mitigated and eventually, in 2019, we witnessed the unusual sight of a president-for-life leaving office early to make way for a successor. First President Nazarbayev's remarkable resignation speech emphasised that he was leaving office to make way for new leaders with new ideas.

This book offers an audit of progress during those first 30 years. Written by experts with a deep knowledge of the country, it provides ample evidence that Kazakhstan has embraced nationhood at home and also found a role for itself amongst the community of nations. Progress in education, industrialisation and political representation is evident. The new capital, Nur-Sultan, has risen from the steppe to become one of the wonders of the world. The huge potential for this vast country, with its abundance of natural resources and sheer physical beauty cannot be over-estimated. And the institutions needed to ensure development – including banks and money markets, courts, academic institutions, and cultural life – are already exerting an influence over the future. Much remains to be done and doubtless there will be difficulties, but we can be confident that Kazakhstan at 30 has come of age.

30 YEARS of INDEPENDENCE of KAZAKHSTAN

EMBASSY OF KAZAKHSTAN